

Spring 1999

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**ANALYSIS OF IMPACT AND VALUE OF NEASC HIGH SCHOOL
ACCREDITATION PROCEDURES ON SCHOOL
ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FROM 1987-1997**

By

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B.A., University of New Hampshire 1971

M.Ed., University of New Hampshire, 1988

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

May, 1999

UMI Number: 9926014

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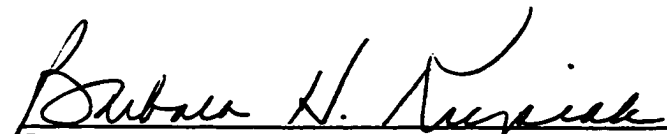
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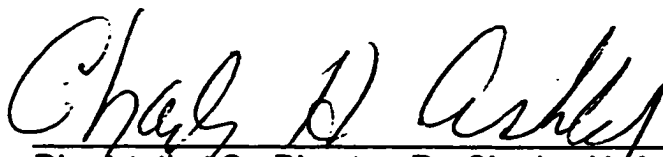
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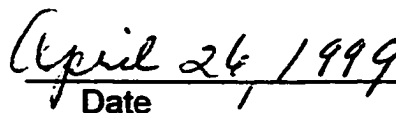
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DEDICATION

With love and thanks, I dedicate this work to my wife, Donna, and my daughters, Alana Jo, Courtney Leigh, and Kelly Jane. They are a continuous source of pride and strength to me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been fortunate to have a wonderful support system at all stages of my doctoral pursuit. The work could never have been completed without the love and support of my wife, Donna, and the extraordinary clerical expertise and constant encouragement of Jane Hanig. To both I am forever grateful.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to each of my committee members. Charlie Ashley has guided my education at the University of New Hampshire since 1971. Charlie has always been the "teacher" I most admired, and whose inspiration has led me to attain three degrees. Barbara Krysiak drove my dissertation as my primary advisor. Her attention to detail, timely coaching sessions, and positive approach assured me that the light at the end of the tunnel was not necessarily that of an oncoming train. She has earned my undying respect and admiration. Todd DeMitchell pushed me further than I realized I could go. He was the football coach who demanded more. Todd had the ability to tighten my research and make me proud of what I accomplished. Stephen Maio has been a constant support since he became Superintendent of Schools for SAU #50. He is a scholar whose opinion and counsel I value. David Flynn generously shared research he had done in the area of NEASC accreditation. His encouragement and friendship were and continue to be very important to me. To all my committee members I express my sincere thanks.

Thank you also to the following gifted people whose willingness to share their expertise helped me to advance my work. David Gebhardt assisted

me with data collection. David Jule helped to develop tables used in the study and Foad Afshar provided statistical support when I most needed it. Sheila Adams offered her technical skills. I could not have achieved the doctorate without the help of these people, the full support of the Rye School Board, past and present, and the dedicated staff of Rye Middle School.

The pursuit of a Ph.D. is a daunting task. For the will to see it through, I thank my parents, Nina and Allan Cushing, who taught me the value of hard work and perseverance. I'd also like to thank my father-in-law, Chester Gloski, for his wise counsel.

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ABSTRACT

From a 1983 federal study which concluded, as its title suggests, that America had become A Nation at Risk because of a failing public school system, the modern standards movement was born. This educational reform movement beginning in the 1980's and continuing through the 1990's brought about the development and establishment of many accountability and improvement initiatives aimed at public schools. Also during this time, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), through its Commission on Public Secondary Schools along with five other regional accrediting agencies across the country, was continuously engaged in the practice of evaluating and accrediting high schools. Accreditation had been the evaluation of choice for New England high schools for decades.

Because of local and state mandated accountability and improvement initiatives, along with changes in the NEASC accreditation process in the aftermath of a Nation at Risk, attitudes and perceptions of the educational community toward the accreditation process have changed over the past decade. Data for this study were gathered from a target population of sixty-six New Hampshire high schools which underwent NEASC accreditation between the years 1987-1997. This survey study sought to determine how key members of the school community, high school principals, superintendents, and school board members, perceived the impact and value of the NEASC accreditation process,

particularly as it effected accountability and improvement in their schools. The study further looked at the relationship between the NEASC accreditation process and the New Hampshire state mandated District Education Improvement Plan (DEIP).

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INFORMATION

Purpose of the Study

The national focus on educational accountability and standards based reform, initiated by the 1983 release of A Nation at Risk (Marzano and Kendall, 1996), has led states, including New Hampshire, to develop accountability and reform initiatives for ensuring quality instruction. In New Hampshire, the State Department of Education requires that each school district develop a District Education Improvement Plan (DEIP). Locally, schools have undergone a variety of school improvement initiatives.

High schools in particular have been caught in the middle of multiple accountability and school improvement initiatives. In addition to the state and local initiatives, 88% of all New Hampshire public high schools are members of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), a standards based accreditation agency. NEASC accreditation, once a comfortable method of evaluation used by New England high schools for decades, has changed over the last ten years. To keep pace with the educational times, in the late 1980's, the leadership of the NEASC made a conscious decision to make changes in the way it accredited public high schools. Among the changes was a public disclosure component of the results of a school's accreditation status. This included reporting on commendations as well as recommendations or areas

needing improvement. Perhaps the most significant change was the increased rigor of the process and the attention to follow up after the recommendations were made. These changes have led to a dramatic increase in the number of New Hampshire high schools receiving adverse actions from the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS), including being placed on warning or even probation. In the wake of increased state and local educational improvement initiatives, and coupled with the changes in the NEASC accreditation process, the attitudes and perceptions of New Hampshire school leaders toward the accreditation process have changed during the past decade.

This study seeks to determine the value of participation in the NEASC. The purpose of this study was to determine to what degree the NEASC process is valued by those charged with effecting local educational improvement and to determine to what degree it is integrated with other educational improvement initiatives.

Specifically, the goal of this research was to examine how New Hampshire school leaders (superintendents, high school principals and school board members) perceive and value the accreditation process as it affects their local high school(s), school systems and communities. It reports the current attitudes and perceptions within each group as well as marks the similarities and differences among them.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **NEASC**. New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the agency which oversees the accreditation of public high schools in New Hampshire.
2. **Accreditation Process**. A continuous process beginning with the self study completed by the faculty, followed by the accreditation visit performed by the NEASC visiting committee, and continued through the follow up reports and activities required of the school itself.
3. **Accreditation Status**. A school's standing with the NEASC (Accreditation; Accreditation with warning; Accreditation with probation; Termination).
4. **Accreditation Visit**. The four days spent by the NEASC visiting committee at the school.
5. **Accreditation Report**. The final report submitted by the visiting committee to the NEASC to assist in determining a school's accreditation status.
6. **Accreditation Response Letter**. For the purposes of this study, this is a letter written to the high school principal after the completion of the accreditation visit. This letter is written by the Director of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools and is the official notification of action taken by the Commission after considering the visiting team report. The school's accreditation status, as well as requests for special reports, are included in this letter.
7. **NHEIAP**. The New Hampshire Education Improvement and Assessment Program (RSA 193-C). This 1993 legislation was established to improve

student achievement and the quality of curriculum and instruction. From this legislation came the NH Curriculum Frameworks, the NHEAP and the DEIP.

8. **Curriculum Frameworks**. A set of content standards which describe what students should know and be able to do at different grade levels in a particular subject area. (High Standards for All Students 1994 p. A-18).
9. **NHEAP**. The New Hampshire Educational Assessment Program. It is based on the standards defined in the curriculum frameworks.
10. **DEIP**. District Education Improvement Plan. The plan is a school district's comprehensive analysis, in the broadest sense, of where it wants to go for the next five years and how it wants to get there. (Questions and Answers About DEIP).
11. **Educational Reform**. For the purposes of this study, includes widespread policy changes at local, state, and national levels aimed at improving the quality of learning and teaching in schools. (High Standards for All Students 1994 p. A-8).
12. **Education Standards**. Is the term used to describe: (1) expectations for what all students should know and be able to do in today's society; and (2) the conditions that enable students to achieve success. Education standards include content standards, performance standards, and opportunity to learn standards. (High Standards for All Students p. A-17).
13. **Performance Standards**. Standards which identify the levels a student can achieve in the subject matter defined in the content standards. They set

specific expectations for student performance and various levels of proficiency.

14. Standards-Based Education. A way of operating schools and educational systems so that standards for student performance are at the center, and the sole objective for everyone in the system is to insure that students meet the standards. (Standards for Our Schools, Tucker & Coddling, p. 320).

General Background Information

Determining how to conduct public school assessment, require school accountability, and ensure quality educational reform, has consumed the educational community at the national, state and local levels since the late 1980's. The opening sentences of the 1983 report, A Nation at Risk, generated strong concern and focused America's attention on its schools. "Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in ... commerce, science, and technological innovations is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report concluded that America was falling behind other industrialized countries, and the cause was low standards in our nation's schools.

The concerns raised by A Nation at Risk became the topics of much heated discussion across the nation. Emphasizing the impact of the federal report, Carroll (1996) wrote, "Since the A Nation at Risk report in 1983, no issue on the public agenda has caused more concern, study, and debate than the quality of public education" (p. 2). As the American public called for higher standards, policymakers focused on flat SAT scores, low graduation rates despite relaxed graduation standards, and poor student performance in math and science when compared to international math and science test scores. The United States Department of Education report showed that, in 1983, American students between the ages of 18 and 24 finished last among students from eight

industrialized nations in geography; and fourteen year olds finished last in science among students from nine industrialized nations (Goddy, 1991).

As a result of the 1983 national report on student achievement, generalizations were drawn about the effectiveness of schools. Public education was not viewed in a positive light. That set the stage for an educational accountability and reform movement which has been in motion throughout the fifteen years that have elapsed since the release of A Nation at Risk.

During that time, the NEASC, through its Commission on Public Secondary Schools along with five other regional accrediting agencies across the country, was continuously engaged in the practice of evaluating and accrediting high schools. NEASC accreditation had been the evaluation of choice for New England high schools for decades. NEASC member schools participate in an exhaustive self-study, peer review, and recommended follow up improvements.

As the public demanded greater accountability, school administrators were forced to produce more and more outcome data. It was not unusual for high schools to have multiple initiatives of accountability and school improvement taking place simultaneously. Besides NEASC accreditation, many New Hampshire high schools had developed a strategic plan and all were responsible for a District Education Improvement Plan (DEIP), a plan that has the expressed purpose of improving schools and aligning local, state and federal initiatives.

A constant refrain heard from school administrators and teachers is that there was not enough time for all the accountability and school improvement initiatives which are on-going in our school systems. The process of whole

school evaluation and school improvement was time consuming, and because of multiple school and district initiatives, it could be redundant. David Gebhardt, a New Hampshire State Department of Education consultant in charge of minimum standards (personal communication, November 4, 1998) said the following, "It seems to me that there is far too much duplication of effort in today's schools, all in the name of accountability and reform." In today's overcommitted public schools, and understaffed state departments of education, there was a need to determine the value of participation in the NEASC accreditation process, as well as relationships between NEASC accreditation and other improvement initiatives underway in New Hampshire's schools.

The Research Questions

To determine the impact and value of NEASC high school accreditation procedures on school accountability and school improvement, data was gathered through the use of a survey designed to elicit answers to the following five research questions:

1. What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?
2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?
3. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?
4. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?

5. What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and DEIP?

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

The target population consisted of New Hampshire school systems having high schools which had participated in a NEASC accreditation visit between the years of 1987-1997. Survey packets were mailed to 57 school districts representing 66 high schools. Specifically, school board members, superintendents, and high school principals were surveyed to obtain information. Survey responses were entered into a computerized database and then transferred into a statistical analysis program. The data were then tabulated and the mean scores of each group were identified for each of the possible 30 responses. The results were organized to enable the researcher to examine statistics for all target population, superintendents only, principals only and school board members only. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized to determine the significance of difference between the perceptions of superintendents, high school principals and school board members. To compare the responses between the target populations, in light of the research questions, hypotheses testing took place. The survey instrument also contained seven open ended questions which were designed to obtain more subjective data from the respondents and to provide a more comprehensive and personal reaction to the assertions beyond the limitations of the quantitative approach. Information collected from the open ended questions was analyzed and catalogued by the researcher by frequency of response. This information provided the researcher

a wider opportunity for interpretation and description of the respondents perceptions of the research questions.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because throughout the last fifteen years coinciding with the modern standards movement, NEASC accreditation, once touted as the accountability and school improvement process of choice by most New Hampshire public high schools, appears to have taken a back seat to other accountability and school improvement initiatives. This has forced changes in the NEASC, which has tried to keep pace with the modern standards movement. As the nation called for increased accountability and the raising of educational standards, the NEASC made a conscious decision to increase and more vigorously enforce its standards, particularly as they related to follow up and school improvement. As shown in a later chart, this resulted in an increase in the number of New Hampshire high schools being issued warnings, being placed on probation, or in rare cases, losing their accreditation. This may have caused a major change in the way New Hampshire school leaders viewed and valued the accreditation process. It had become obvious that schools were having a hard time measuring up to the changes brought about in the accreditation process as a result of the NEASC response to A Nation at Risk.

NEASC's increased vigor to maintain standards, coupled with the reality that the State Department of Education in NH requires that all public schools provide to them a District Educational Improvement Plan based on quality educational standards, sets up the direction of this research. If the NEASC

process of accountability and school improvement is valued by public high school educational leaders, why shouldn't school districts use the process to fulfill their mandated DEIP requirements? Why do they turn to additional reform initiatives? Asayesh (as cited in Coan, 1995) made the following point:

Accredited secondary schools enroll 70% to 75% of all American high school students. With some 10,452 high schools as members, accrediting organizations have the potential to establish and enforce standards and processes that could greatly improve their schools and the education their students receive. (p.6)

The results of this study will have an impact on educational accountability and school improvement in New Hampshire. The results can benefit New Hampshire public high schools, who are members of NEASC, as they develop their school improvement plans. The study's findings should be useful to New Hampshire's Superintendents of Schools as they attempt to consolidate district accountability and school improvement initiatives. The results should be of interest to the NH State Department of Education as it monitors DEIP for school improvement. In addition, the study will be important not only to NEASC as part of its own continuous improvement planning, but should also be valuable nationally. This study will provide information about the strengths and weaknesses of the NEASC process that can be analyzed by the five other regional accrediting agencies.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to public secondary schools in New Hampshire served by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Generalizations to public secondary

schools in the other five states served by NEASC, as well as public secondary schools served by the other five regional accreditation associations, may be precluded. Additionally, because this study is limited to public secondary schools, generalizations to private secondary schools will be limited. Within the state of New Hampshire, the pool of public secondary schools from which the sample is drawn is limited to those which completed a self study and received a visiting team report during the time period of 1987-1997. Therefore, generalizations to all public secondary schools in New Hampshire may be precluded.

Nature and Order of Presentation

Chapter I focused on a general introduction to the study, including the purpose of the study, definitions of key terms, general background information, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the limitations of the study which surveys key members of New Hampshire school districts only.

From this general introduction, succeeding chapters will expand upon the information presented in Chapter I. Specifically, Chapter II reviews existing literature relevant to the following: educational reform, the history of accreditation, the development and role of NEASC, accreditation and evaluation, the NEASC accreditation process, accreditation as a tool for school improvement, the national standards movement, NEASC and the future, and precedence for this study.

Chapter III focuses on the conceptual framework and methodology used in this study.

Chapter IV contains the analysis of the gathered data.

Chapter V presents general conclusions. Areas of further study and possible implications for the NEASC leadership, as well as for local and state educational leadership, will be discussed.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The ensuing literature review is used to establish the direction and scope of this study. For this presentation, the material is organized under the following headings:

Modern Educational Reform Movement. This section is an overview of the first and second wave of the modern educational reform movement.

The History of Accreditation. This section traces the history of accreditation and the development of the six regional accrediting agencies. It also examines the concept of standards for accreditation.

Development and Role of NEASC. Under this heading, the literature review traces the growth and development of NEASC from inception to current times.

Accreditation and Evaluation. This section addresses the concept of accreditation and evaluation as they apply to the NEASC process.

The NEASC Accreditation Process. Under this heading the steps of the NEASC accreditation process are reviewed.

Accreditation as a Tool for School Improvement. This section examines how the accreditation process translates to school improvement.

The National Standards Movement. This section traces the history of the national standards movement. The New Hampshire response to the

national standards movement is presented, followed by the NEASC response, including its decisions concerning restructuring and public disclosure.

NEASC and The Future. This section discusses how the NEASC has positioned itself for the future.

Precedence for this Study. This section presents the Flynn (1997) study as precedence for the current study and outlines the conclusions of the Flynn study.

Summary of Research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review.

Modern Educational Reform Movement

The modern educational reform movement began in the early 1980's and continues today. It is characterized by two waves of reform. The first wave involved regulation by state legislatures. In his discussion of the Tennessee Educational Improvement Act of 1984, DeMitchell (1992) reports that "so many states enacted educational laws in response to a deluge of reform reports, that consequently this period has been called the first wave of reform" (p.12).

Asayesh (1993) stated that the 1983 report, "A Nation at Risk refocused public attention on education...jump-starting the first period of intense reform since the 1960's (p.9). This first wave of reform promoted an agenda which sought to achieve 'excellence' in education. This was a reform movement driven by regulations, as Coan (1995) asserts, "Those advocating excellence felt that poor student achievement did not result from a poorly designed system, but from

a lack of quality control." State and local regulations were aimed at improving poor student achievement. The first wave changes (including increased graduation requirements, competency testing, and mandated length of school days and year) were attempts on the part of state legislatures through district school boards to establish higher expectations for students and teachers by raising standards. The emphasis of the first wave of reform was on greater state control through mandates that were designed to improve the existing goals and structures of schools (Cuban 1987).

By the early 1990's, when it became clear that the first wave of reform did not live up to its promise, a second wave of reform which emphasized restructuring became the main focus of the reform movement. The first wave of reform failed to identify linkages between high standards and student learning (Coan 1995). That prompted a group of reformers to advocate a much more radical approach to fixing the schools. Citing "the virtual lack of systems changing policy mechanisms" of the first wave of reform, DeMitchell (1992) wrote, "A second wave soon began to gather strength. It changed the policy instrument means of system changing to a policy end generally called restructuring" (p.413).

At the same time that the modern reform movement was driving the education agenda nationally, the NEASC was accrediting nearly all of the high schools in New England. The first and second waves of the educational reform movement of the 1980's and 1990's impacted the way member schools viewed

the NEASC accreditation process. This forced the NEASC to review and restructure its accreditation process to keep pace with the educational times.

The History of Accreditation

Secondary School Accreditation

The initial attempt to regulate America's schools began in 1867 when the first national department of education was established. This marked the beginning of federal activity in the field of education. Without established accreditation associations, there was always the possibility of federal intervention or national standards (Moore, 1986).

In 1871, the University of Michigan sought to develop a way to ensure that local high schools and preparatory schools were adequately preparing their students to enter the university. It is at that point, that secondary school accreditation became significant. Following notice to schools, the preparation of questions to be answered by them, and inspection of the work of interested schools by members of the faculty, the University of Michigan notified the high schools in four cities that their students would be granted admission based on their high school certificates. The certificates served as proof that students had studied all that was required qualifying them for admission (Wright, 1955).

Shortly thereafter, universities in other states followed this lead. In 1885 the Massachusetts Classical and Teachers' Association founded the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools (Moore, 1986). This new association was founded for the purpose of bringing together preparatory school headmasters with college and university presidents so that they could

discuss common concerns, especially college admissions. It was the need to establish closer ties between preparatory schools and colleges that prompted "official" regional, voluntary accreditation in the United States.

The Development of Six Regional Accreditation Associations

Within two years, another group of educators followed New England's lead and developed relationships between educational institutions which led to the creation of the Middle Association of Colleges and Schools. Ten years later, in 1895, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, were established with the focus of standardizing and overseeing the evaluations of high schools. By 1924, the Northwest and the Western Association were in operation (Flynn, 1997).

The six regional accreditation organizations provided those responsible for education the vehicle to determine their own needs and expectations without fear of government interference or imposed national standards. Educators whose mission it was to maintain quality education joined forces to establish clear standards and policies that met the academic expectations of their time. Membership was then, and still is, voluntary.

Through the years, as the six accrediting associations grew, their initial focus of developing cooperative procedures among themselves and the schools and colleges they represented shifted to the establishment of standards by which those institutions would be judged. The primary focus of their attention was the maintenance of strong post-secondary levels of education.

The Examination of Standards

In the early 1930's, the North Central Association called for a nationwide investigation of secondary school accrediting under the direction of all the regional accrediting associations (Geiger, 1970). In 1933, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) joined North Central as part of the Committee for Cooperative Study of Secondary School Standards. This study examined the standards as well as the methods by which schools were judged. Those standards were primarily quantitative and were designed to ensure conformity of program (Moore, 1986).

The Committee for Cooperative Study of Secondary School Standards published the first edition of Evaluative Criteria in 1940. This document was the first official notification to schools that, while it was important to meet quantitative standards, a good school had to be measured against itself and those whom it served. Qualitative assessment allowed the diversity of the individual schools to become a major factor in the understanding of the individual educational institution (Geiger, 1970).

The Committee for Cooperative Study of Secondary School Standards became, and remains to the present day, the National Study of School Evaluation. Its structure is educator-based. Through the years, each of the regional accrediting associations has been represented on the Board of Directors of the organization. The National Study of School Evaluation serves as the driving force for preparation, publication, and distribution of the instruments and

materials used by secondary schools across the country for the process of evaluation and accreditation.

Development and Role of the NEASC

A search of the literature identified a number of sources that give historical information about the origins and development of the accreditation model of public school evaluation. According to The First Hundred Years, the book described by one of its contributors, William G. Saltonstall, as a "Centennial portrait" of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the organization was founded in 1885 (Moore, 1986). The expressed purpose of the NEASC at the time of its founding was to set and maintain standards by which public and private secondary schools could be evaluated. This would assure the local communities, as well as colleges, that member secondary schools were providing a worthwhile educational program for their students. From 1885 to 1976, the emphasis of the NEASC was to provide guidelines and standards which would be used to identify good schools as compared to those schools which could not meet the standards of the association.

Beginning with the post World War II period, the role of the NEASC began to expand. It was at this time that the association was thrust into the accreditation arena because of expectations that it would assist the federal government in determining whether institutions of higher education were qualified to accept tuitions through the Veterans Readjustment Act (Coan, 1995). This led to a designation in 1976 by the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare that the NEASC would be the official accrediting agency for post-

secondary schools in New England. From 1976 to the present, New England secondary schools, under the guidance and leadership of the NEASC, have developed and maintained a process, based on adherence to certain standards, that leads to accreditation.

In the foreword of the centennial publication, The First Hundred Years, (Moore, 1986) Robert E.L. Strider, Chairman of the Centennial Meeting of the NEASC, states:

It is an irony that the New England Association was the last of the six to institute formal accreditation as its principal activity. The increasingly complex procedures that underlie this central function have been developed and refined in New England only through the final third of the Association's hundred years. (p. ix)

The reason for the NEASC's late entry into accreditation may be because accreditation carries with it an implication of approval and quality assurance. It would seem unlikely that the elite colleges which make up much of the New England membership, would feel the need for an external agency to sanction what should be apparent to all (Moore, 1986).

That withstanding, the issue of accreditation was placed before the membership at the annual meeting of 1952 in the form of a constitutional amendment. Nearly 270 members voted in the affirmative; only four voted in the negative. This vote marked a new era in NEASC, making it an accrediting association in the full sense of the term. The interrelationship between schools and colleges became less important, as attention became focused on quality assurance (Moore, 1986).

Coan (1995) stated, "The growth and development of NEASC oftentimes reflected the mood of Americans toward their schools" (p. 17). From its inception in 1885, until the Post World War II period, the NEASC served as a comfortable social club for colleges and those secondary schools which prepared students for college. It provided a forum for ideal secondary curricula and college admission standards to be discussed. This was a time when most Americans were proud of their public schools, and relatively small numbers of high school graduates would continue their education (Moore, 1986).

The 1970's was a time of prosperity for public education, and a period during which the NEASC grew and gained financial stability. With the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, the quality of America's schools was called into question. Government at the national, state, and local level expressed the need for increased accountability. As a result, in the 1980's and 1990's, the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools established more rigorous standards for membership.

Accreditation and Evaluation

Scriven (1986) defined evaluation as the science of valuing. He felt the evaluators must determine merit or worth, not just provide information to decision makers.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1977) stated that the central purpose of evaluation is, "the assessment of the level of quality and excellence of any organization, process or service" (p.5). The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1977) stated that , "Evaluation should,

above all else lead to improvement offered by the school. It is not an end in itself" (p.10).

Accreditation is defined by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (1977) "as recognition of a high quality and well-balanced educational programs" (p.12). The Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Virginia (1978), in the manual listing standards for accrediting schools in Virginia, defines accreditation of schools as, "a process designed to establish a basic foundation for quality education" (p.1). Fallon (1980), in his study of NEASC, referred to accreditation as the method by which schools are evaluated or recognized as having particular standards of adequacy or excellence. According to Herbert Moyer (1993), the purpose of accreditation is to supply evidence of accountability. The accreditation process is necessary to provide assurance that our schools have met standards of educational quality.

David Flynn (1997), in his study of the value of the NEASC process, made a distinction between evaluation and accreditation. "Evaluation and accreditation are two very different terms which are often used interchangeably" (p.36). For purposes of this research, the distinction between evaluation and accreditation can be summed up in the following way: Evaluation is a process in which a school must undergo a self-study and be judged by its peer group. The evaluation results must lead the accrediting commission to believe that the school is meeting the standards set by the NEASC in order for the school to be granted accredited status. Accreditation cannot be granted to a member school without that school first undergoing a process of evaluation that measures the

school against the NEASC standards. Evaluation is the process through which accreditation is achieved.

The NEASC Accreditation Process

A review of the NEASC literature available at the NEASC headquarters in Burlington, Massachusetts provides ample information regarding the accreditation process from its early days to proposals for future revisions. Various generations of handbooks, manuals, membership rosters, documents, news clippings, and correspondence to member schools, trace a living accreditation process that attempts to keep pace with the demands of an everchanging educational climate.

The Commission on Public Secondary Schools, one of the five NEASC Commissions, attends to the accreditation status of each member public high school in New England. Although membership is voluntary, in order to continue to meet the requirements of the NEASC, a public high school and its programs must successfully measure themselves against ten qualitative standards (Appendix A) The standards are devised and approved by the member constituency. Once initial accreditation has been achieved, each member high school must commit to a continuing school improvement process, framed within a ten-year period.

The process begins with an intensive one to two year self-study. During the self-study, the school community is forced to look at the merit, or worth, of its programs. To do this, parents, faculty, staff, students, and community members have an opportunity to participate in the evaluation through questionnaires or by

serving on standard subcommittees that are developed around the NEASC Standards of Membership. The various members of the school community must describe, give evidence of, and assess the school's various components. Accountability is insured in that a single instrument is used by everyone taking part in the evaluation. For example, to measure how well the individual school is meeting the needs of its student body, each assertion made by the self-study group must be supported with evidence.

One of the primary goals of the NEASC evaluation report is to develop a body of recommendations unique to the school being evaluated, which will assist that school to change and improve so that it can better serve its community. After the self-study is completed, a team of outside educators visit the school to "evaluate" its performance. If the self-study was done well, then the team will validate what the school says about itself. Over seventy percent of the recommendations which appear in the evaluation report are conceptually similar to those identified in the school's self-study (Bennett, 1993).

During this second phase of the process, the chairpersons, utilizing all the information gathered by the visiting team, write a draft of the Evaluation Report, which is submitted to the principal for a review of factual data. The principal is responsible for releasing the whole evaluation report to the school and community. Each section of the report includes a paragraph of factual or descriptive information, a paragraph of perceptions as to how effectively the school is meeting a particular standard, a list of commendations of exceptional

achievements, and a list of recommendations suggesting how the school could better meet a standard.

The follow-up program is the third piece of the accreditation process, in which the school addresses valid recommendations identified in the self-study, which were not included in the evaluation report. Through routine and special progress reports submitted to the Commission, the school is asked to demonstrate that it is making reasonable progress in adhering to the Standards for Accreditation and to document its progress addressing identified needs. (NEASC Accreditation Handbook, 1997, p.61) Accountability can be measured in terms of percentage of completed recommendations.

Accreditation as a Tool for School Improvement

Unlike the variety of educational reform movements of the eighties and nineties, the NEASC accreditation process is based on a holistic approach to school evaluation. Astuto (1994) argued that there are many authentic learning experiences which take place everyday in schools, which cannot be measured in a narrow accountability system that does not consider the complexities of educational practices. Outcomes that are narrowly defined around what the students know, miss the relationship between teachers and students, and the way in which daily interactions in and outside of the classroom promote diversity and respect for others. Elliot Eisner (1995), TheodoreSizer (1995), and Nel Noddings (1997) also warn that in and of themselves, test driven standards do not measure the qualities that make up a rich learning experience.

Daniel Stufflebeam (1983) wrote, "The most important purpose of program evaluation is not to prove, but improve" (p.117). Taylor and Bryant (1996) strongly state that "If evaluation is to be an effective tool for improving one's work, it must make sense" (NASSP Bulletin, p.71). A holistic evaluation approach, such as the one used in the NEASC accreditation process, which is based on standards that cover the whole learning environment from philosophy to facility, may offer the best road map to school improvement that "makes sense."

The National Standards Movement

Anne Lewis (1995) former Executive Director of Education U.S.A. wrote that, "Whether lauded as a sign of progress or scorned as anathema, the notion of national standards for what students learn in public schools is the hottest item in education reform today" (p.745). It is this "hot topic" that has led to educational reform across the country. For the purposes of this study the national focus on school reform has caused the New Hampshire State Department of Education, as well as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, to answer the national call for tougher educational standards. This has led to increased, and at times competing, accountability and reform initiatives in New Hampshire public high schools. This section of the literature review will present an overview of the history of the national standards movement, followed by the New Hampshire and NEASC response to the call for higher standards.

History of the National Standards Movement

As stated by Elliot Eisner (1995), "Efforts to reform American schools is not exactly a novel enterprise" (p.758). According to Berkson (1997), The latest wave of reform beginning in 1983 with A Nation at Risk "has been the effort to establish national standards that could be used to shift the educational system to a high level of student achievement" (p.207). Today, fifteen years later, Berkson wrote that Americans have turned away from the idea of national standards and that efforts to produce them have been thwarted by pressures from conflicting political viewpoints.

Diane Ravitch (1996), former Assistant Secretary of Education during the Bush administration, made the case that we already have national standards. She cited textbooks and tests that were uniform throughout the country because only a very few large companies supply textbooks and tests to most school districts. As further evidence, she used important national tests such as the College Board's Advanced Placement tests, the S.A.T., and the International Baccalaureate that embody the high standards recognized and respected in every state in the nation. Ravitch sought standards that are national, and not federal standards managed by the federal government. While she saw the need for national standards she did not think that the textbook companies should be shaping them.

Marc Tucker and Judy Coddling, in their 1998 book entitled Standards for our Schools, trace the development of the national standards movement. According to Tucker and Coddling the movement began in 1989 when President

Bush convened the first national summit on education. At that summit, which was attended by the state governors, the need for national goals was agreed upon. A few months later, the governors and the president established a set of national goals for education. Shortly after that a National Education Goals Panel was created made up of governors and administration officials who would take the responsibility for monitoring the nation's progress toward the goals. This panel, led by its chairman, Governor Roy Romer of Colorado, determined that goals would not be as effective as standards in improving American education. The country was told that it needed clear education standards and new forms of assessment to go with them (National Goals Panel, 1991). The Department of Education provided funds to a number of national subject-matter organizations to begin the process of developing national standards within their disciplines.

In 1989, in response to the calls to raise the expectations of American schools, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) developed and published national math standards. Soon, curriculum groups in other disciplines followed with their own standards for curriculum and evaluation. At the same time, according to Tucker and Coddling (1998), "state after state were gathering its citizens together to build a statewide consensus on the right standards for that state, drawing on the work of the disciplinary societies and experts in the field" (p.42).

In 1994, federal legislation, such as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the Improving America's School Act, and the School to Work Opportunities Act, reinforced the need for local school districts to set high community

educational standards for all students and required educational improvement planning. Referred to by Lewis (1995), in a 1995 Gallup Poll on the effectiveness of America's public schools, 84% of the respondents favored higher standards than are now required in math, English, history, and science in order to graduate from high school (Kappan, 1995, p.747). In 1996, a National Association of Secondary School Principals poll established that nearly half of all Americans did not believe that a high school diploma meant that students have learned the basics (cited in NASSP, 1996).

At the 1996 Education Summit in Palisades, New York, forty governors and forty-five business leaders expressed the need for higher standards for student achievement. Tucker and Coddling (1998) describe President Clinton's second State of the Union message in January, 1997 as the "crowning moment in the phase of the national march towards standards" (p.42). In this address Clinton called for national but not federal standards and announced his initiative to develop two national examinations, one in reading at the fourth grade level and one in mathematics at the eighth grade level.

Despite the expressed support for national educational standards, in the summer of 1997, the US House of Representatives rejected national testing by a 295-125 vote. In that vote, seventy-five Democrats crossed party lines to join Republicans and voted not to appropriate money for the voluntary tests. In late September of 1997, United States Education Secretary Richard Riley announced that he was temporarily suspending work on the national tests (Leadership News, 1997, Oct.).

This action taken by Education Secretary Richard Riley has put the federal standards movement on hold. In his essay entitled A Place to Stand - Breaking the impasse over standards William Berkson (1997) made the following point: "In the face of this turning away from national standards after nearly 15 years of effort, we must ask ourselves, Are national standards in fact needed?" (p.208).

The paradox is that while the public overwhelmingly supports the concept of national standards, politicians and educators have moved very slowly. As demonstrated by the already cited US House of Representatives vote on the national testing program, both conservatives and liberals have serious reservations about any plan for national standards. Many conservatives were concerned that a national program will take away local control. Many liberals were concerned that any program which involves testing will unfairly discriminate against minority students. The political "right" in Washington disliked anything "national", while the left was wary of any manner of testing (Finn, Jr., 1997). The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) questioned if the endorsement of a national test would be a "litmus test" of whether or not one supported the current Clinton administration. Paul Houston, executive director of the AASA, posed this question to his membership, "Should AASA support all educational initiatives of a pro-education administration, even the misguided ones?" (Leadership News, 1997, Oct.) As of now, the AASA has taken no official position on the topic.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in its historic publication Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution (1996) made its case for high education standards in the opening paragraph of the report, "We want to emphasize at the outset of this report that we reject the idea of change without commensurate concern for high academic standards" (p.8).

At this time NASSP, while supporting high standards, did not subscribe to national standards. Instead, the organization has challenged its membership to collaborate around issues of curriculum and instruction.

Now the two levels, secondary and post secondary, must unite ... higher education and secondary education ought to negotiate terms for reframing and specifying the essential content and skills that high schools should provide to students to enhance their prospects for success in college. (NASSP, Breaking Ranks p.84)

The report determines that accreditation of post-secondary schools by an outside agency is necessary in order to ensure quality standards of practice for their teacher preparation programs.

Educational leaders are divided on the issue of national standards. The Council for Basic Education supports national standards, as does the National Educational Association (Leadership News, 1997, Oct.). American Federation of Teachers President for many years, Al Shanker, supported national standards and high stakes testing. To liberals, he explained that, "It is the failure to have standards and stakes that leads to elitism in a system where few succeed except for a small group of youngsters who already have a lot going for them" (qtd. In Finn, Jr., 1997). On the other side of the argument, leading educational thinkers such as Nel Noddings, TheodoreSizer and Elliot Eisner do not support national

standards. Noddings (1997) feared that the concept of standards has not been analyzed carefully enough to warrant the establishment of national standards. TheodoreSizer (1995) disagreed with the standards movement for two reasons. First, he foresaw the likelihood that it will lead to test-driven instruction. Secondly, he stated that government-sponsored standards ignore the realities of resource-poor schools and teachers who lack support for changing their instruction (p. 749).

Elliot Eisner (1995) viewed standards as limiting. "Standards do not represent the most important end we seek in education ... we seek work that displays ingenuity, complexity, and the student's personal signature" (Eisner, Feb. p. 22). According to Eisner, educators need to pay attention to the importance of building a culture of schooling that is intellectual in character, one that values questions and ideas at least as much as getting right answers. Eisner concluded that "vitality within any organization is more likely when there are opportunities to pursue fresh opportunities, to exercise imagination, to try things out, and to relinquish the quest for certainty in either pedagogical method or educational outcome" (Kappan, p.764).

Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) was worried that the appeal of national standards and tests for some reformers would be that "they would provide the basis...for rewards and sanctions for students, schools, and districts that would motivate students and teachers and drive reform" (p.238). She saw this as a carrot and stick approach that does not work.

An alternative approach to school reform proposed by Darling-Hammond is, "to use standards and assessment as means of giving feedback to educators and as tools for organizing student and teacher learning, rather than as a sledge hammer to beat schools into change" (p.241). She highlighted Vermont's work at the state level as a meaningful model of standards and reform. Today the spotlight has shifted from a discussion on national standards to a focus of how best to maximize state assessment and reform initiatives.

The New Hampshire Response to the National Standards Movement

New Hampshire, following the lead of the rest of New England, as well as the country, has developed its own process of accountability and reform. In 1993 the New Hampshire Legislature passed the New Hampshire Educational Improvement and Assessment Program - RSA 193-C (High Standards for All Students, p.2-1). This legislation mandated assessment based on the state curriculum frameworks. It is around the state curriculum frameworks that school districts are encouraged to design their comprehensive improvement plans. The program includes two major components: Curriculum Frameworks, which define standards for learning in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies; and a statewide assessment program, which is based on standards defined in the frameworks.

In the preface of the document High Standards for all Students (NH Department of Education, 1994), New Hampshire Commissioner of Education, Elizabeth Twomey, gave the following overview:

In New Hampshire and across the nation, new demands are being made of our educational system because of emerging requirements for what

American students must know and be able to do to participate in today's society. The foundation for the Department of Education's efforts to forward the cause of quality education for all children in the state is the New Hampshire Education Improvement and Assessment Program (NHEIAP). NHEIAP is based on challenging standards that define what children should know and be able to do at the completion of different levels of their education. (p.v)

In an April 17, 1995 memo to New Hampshire school superintendents, Commissioner Twomey, citing recommendations made in the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), clearly expressed the need to strengthen educational programs based on local school district plans. Twomey stated that throughout IASA, there are references to state and school district plans for educational improvement and the coordinated use of federal funds to support education improvement plans. Based on the law (IASA), Twomey expressed the need for New Hampshire to move forward with District Educational Improvement Plans (DEIPs) for the 1996 school year.

District Educational Improvement Plan

A review of the correspondence from Commissioner Twomey to New Hampshire school superintendents traced the development of the DEIP, a state initiative evolving from a federal law. DEIP is defined by the State Department of Education as a "school district's comprehensive analysis, in the broadest sense, of where it wants to go for the next five years and how it wants to get there" (NHEIP, 1995). In Overview: A Guide for Developing a DEIP, (1995), the New Hampshire Department of Education cited the following five reasons to support the completion of a DEIP:

1. To involve the community in deciding the goals of a district.

2. To provide a map (not a route) indicating where education is going in the district.
3. To establish consistent goals and high standards for all students.
4. To align local, state, and federal initiatives.
5. To make the best use of what you have.

In her April 1995 memo, Twomey stated that preliminary DEIPs submitted to the state would be the basis for the approval of grants under Title I of IASA.

Later, responding to apparent confusion, on July 6, 1995, Twomey sent a clarification letter to school districts stating that, "By October 1, 1995, each district must have submitted a 'plan to plan.' This is the process which school districts intend to use to develop the plan (DEIP) during the next year. This is a requirement of the federal Department of Education which will withhold monies for the year if the 'plan to plan' is not submitted." Twomey concluded with the following:

The United States Education Department is requesting that districts examine all of their programs in a holistic manner in order to insure that their goals and objectives consider the needs of all children and the programs are congruent with one another. (p.3)

During the 1995-1996 school year, the New Hampshire Department of Education developed a consolidated grant application which would indicate how a district intended to use its federal and state funds to implement its educational improvement plan. Beginning with the 1996-1997 school year, each district was required to develop a DEIP which the state would use for approving school projects.

In a pamphlet entitled "Questions and Answers about DEIP" prepared by the New Hampshire Department of Education (1995), it is stated that districts may use prior district wide plans in preparing their DEIP. However, the only

mention of any prior district wide plan is strategic planning. In her April, 1995 memo, Twomey wrote, "Some districts have already been extensively involved in strategic planning. Such efforts may or may not meet IASA needs.

Fundamental to the approval of any local district plan will be broad community involvement, the plan's emphasis upon having all students reach high standards, and its use as the basis for program and budgeting decisions" (p.2). Noticeably missing is any reference to NEASC accreditation.

NEASC's Response to the National Standards movement

"They used to be the Lone Ranger," John A Lammel, the Associate Executive Director of the Association of Secondary School Principals, said of the six national accreditation agencies, "but now that states have taken a greater initiative in setting standards, accreditation groups have lost their clout" (Portner, 1997 p.2). As a result of the modern standards movement, the value and impact of the NEASC has been called into question. Once considered a prestigious badge of honor worn by 95% of all high schools in New England (NEASC Membership Roster, 1998), as proof that their local school measured up to the same quality standards that were required of all member high schools in New England, the NEASC accreditation process used prior to 1983 was apparently not rigorous enough to satisfy educational critics of the modern standards movement.

Until the 1980's, accreditation was something high schools engaged in once every ten years without much public acknowledgment. As Flynn (1997) stated, "There had been a friendly and professional camaraderie between the

schools and the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the NEASC, and while the intent clearly was to uphold standards, there was a mutual, albeit, tacit, understanding that it would take something very significant to rock the boat”

(p.12). According to Director of the Secondary Commission, Dr. Pamela Gray Bennett:

While there might have been rumblings about perceptions of inadequacy at a school, there was no pressure for a school to change or to do with less or to be accountable for those perceived inadequacies. Instead, there was an assumption of adequacy, and schools were left to their own devices rather than being required to be accountable. (cited in Flynn, p. 13)

The 1980's was in many ways a defining period for the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Public Secondary Schools. As evidenced by the minutes of the board of trustees, many meetings were held in the 1980's, the purpose of which was to make certain that the NEASC membership standards would meet and align with the initiatives of educational reform as well as maintain the integrity of the association. In response to increasing demands for greater school accountability, the Commission on Public Secondary Schools and its member schools began to look at the accreditation process more closely.

Two important decisions were made by the Commission that moved the Commission and the way in which it conducted accreditation into a new direction. The first decision involved restructuring, and the second involved disclosure.

Restructuring

The first decision resulted in a restructuring of the Commission's standards and internal procedures so that accreditation would have more impact

on school accountability. As a result, the standards were revised and a standard on student assessment was added. In addition, a new component called “perceptions” was added to the evaluation report. Coan (1995) described the impact of the perception component in the following way, “Evaluators could discuss the effect, consequences, or impact of the factual information on the school and its ability to meet each standard” (p. 4).

In the mid-eighties, a new training program was implemented for the Chairs of visiting committees. In addition, new handbooks were produced by the commission staff to ensure an overall uniformity in reporting (Flynn, p. 13). Finally, the revised standards of membership required involvement of the whole school community in the evaluation process. Schools were required to focus more intently on the follow-up process once the evaluation was complete.

These changes led to more schools being asked to submit special progress reports, being placed on warning or even probation as they couldn't measure up to the revised standards and process. In an October 4, 1998, Boston Globe article, Pamela Gray-Bennett, head of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools, was quoted as saying, “Out of 700 member schools in New England, 25 are on probation, including six in New Hampshire, which is a high number” (Kittredge, 1998, p.NH9).

An examination of the 66 New Hampshire high schools' response letters from the Commission of Public Secondary Schools to high schools which participated in the accreditation visit during the years 1987-1997, demonstrates a progressive increase in the number of special progress reports requested

following the accreditation visit. Table 1.1 traces the percentages of schools which participated in the accreditation visit during the years 1987-1997 and were subsequently asked to submit special progress reports.

Table 1.1
1987-1997
Schools Requested to Submit Special Progress Reports

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Response Letters</u>	<u>No. of Reports Requested</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1987	2	0	0%
1988	4	1	25%
1989	2	0	0%
1990	10	7	70%
1991	1	0	0%
1992	7	3	42.8%
1993	10	7	70%
1994	12	11	91.6%
1995	7	6	85%
1996	6	3	50%
<u>1997</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>80%</u>
<u>Total</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>63.6%</u>

5 Year Comparison

<u>Years</u>	<u>No. of Response Letters</u>	<u>No. of Reports Requested</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1987-1992	26	11	42.3%
1992-1997	47	34	72.3%

Further study of the response letters from the Commission of Public Secondary Schools to the 66 high schools which participated in an accreditation visit during the years 1987-1997 demonstrates a similar progression of increases in the number of adverse actions taken by the Commission following the

accreditation visit. If schools are not meeting standards, the Commission places the school on warning or invites them to show cause as to why the school should not be placed on probation.

Table 1.2 traces the percentage of New Hampshire schools who were placed on warning or invited to show cause as to why they should not be placed on probation immediately after consideration of the visiting committee report.

Table 1.2 Schools Placed on Warning or Probation						
<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Response Letters</u>	<u>Warnings*</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Show Cause</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Probation **</u>
1987	2	0	0%	0	0%	0
1988	4	0	0%	0	0%	0
1989	2	0	0%	0	0%	0
1990	10	2	20%	1	10%	0
1991	1	0	0%	0	0%	0
1992	7	2	28.5%	0	0%	0
1993	10	4	40%	2	20%	1
1994	12	6	50%	2	16%	1
1995	7	4	57.1%	2	28.5%	2
1996	6	0	0%	2	33.3%	2
1997	5	3	60%	0	0%	2
<u>Total</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>31.8%</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>13.6%</u>	<u>8</u>

5 Year Comparison						
<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Response Letters</u>	<u>Warnings *</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Show Cause</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Probation **</u>
1987-1992	26	4	15.3%	1	03.8%	0
1992-1997	47	19	40.4%	8	17.2%	8

* Not included in this column are those schools who, as a result of a required progress report, were placed on warning status.

** Indicates the actual year a school was placed on probation following decision by Board of Trustees regarding Show Cause - does not correspond to No. Of Response Letters for that year and, therefore, cannot be percentaged.

In addition to the action taken directly after consideration of the visiting committee report, several schools went from accredited status to warning status at a later date for failure to address certain standards in a timely fashion. There are schools which were on warning in Table 1.2 who went to probation after failure to comply satisfactorily with the Commission's request for follow up action on certain recommendations. It is clear by the increase in adverse actions that the association's standards are being more vigorously enforced.

Disclosure

The second NEASC policy decision concerned public disclosure. Until 1989 the decision as to whether or not to release accreditation reports belonged to the school and not to the Commission. The only requirement regarding disclosure by the Commission was that, if reports were released to the public, they had to be released in their entirety. Prior to 1989, the reports were usually available at the school, the superintendent's office, and the public library. Following a 1988 recommendation of its policy committee, the commission voted that a member school be required to make the contents of the evaluation report public within sixty days of receiving it. This change focused considerable attention on the school and highlighted both the school's strengths and weaknesses to the local public. The public could now get answers to its questions about the quality of its schools. Coan (1995) states, "Taxpayers wanted to know how effective their schools were and expected an accreditation evaluation to tell them (p.5). Now that the public was involved, the NEASC took on a more visible role in the accountability movement.

For the school, there were advantages and disadvantages to public disclosure of their accreditation status. On the plus side, school leaders used the reports to drive school improvement and to secure funding for areas of recommendation in the reports such as facility improvements, curriculum support, and increased staff development funding. An advantage to public disclosure was that an outside agency highlighting a deficiency in a school facility or program led to community awareness and often budgetary support of the recommendations. On the negative side, all of a school's weaknesses were open for public scrutiny. Having a high school that was placed on warning or probation put tremendous pressure on school leaders. Prior to public disclosure, accreditation was a function primarily of principals and faculty. With the spotlight and media attention surrounding accreditation brought by public disclosure, superintendents and school board members were forced to take on a more active role in the process. It was no longer seen as just a high school experience. Superintendents and school board members became more aware of the accreditation process and its positive and negative effects on the school system. As a result, they became more interested and involved in the process.

NEASC and the Future

A Nation at Risk, released by the Commission of Excellence in Education (1983), concluded that American education was in deep trouble. Its call for higher standards became the main topic of education in the 1990's. The NEASC has modeled continuous improvement since the mid 1980's. The high school Commission hired researcher Tom Wilson to review and make recommendations

using wide membership input regarding what changes should be made in the accreditation process beginning in the year 2000. The study determined that accreditation should make the tough calls about what is good enough. It should focus on teaching and learning, support school improvement, and engage the public.

NEASC has revised its mission and is in the process of developing new standards for the year 2000 visits. The new standards will condense the current ten standards to seven standards, which will focus on teaching and learning, including output data and the financial support of the community.

Pamela Gray-Bennett, head of the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools, described the year 2000 standards in the following way:

It is a very big change ... Where in the past teachers underwent the scrutiny, the new standards will focus squarely on the students instead...Whatever a school says they expect students to know and be able to do, they will be held accountable for. This is not lofty. If they say it, they have to prove it. (as cited in Kittredge, 1998, NHp.9)

In the November, 1998 NEASC Notes, Bennett wrote to the member schools about the new standards. She explained that the standards for the year 2000 were deliberately designed to reflect the Commission's mission, which is defined as "maximizing learning in member schools" (p.17). To that end, there is a separate standard on instruction, when prior to the year 2000 instruction had been included with the standard on curriculum. Also, there are brand new standards on leadership and organization, school resources for learning, and community resources for learning. According to Dr. Bennett, this change "has to

do with belonging to the scholarly version of the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association.” (Kittredge, 1998, p.N.H.9).

A review of the literature showed that the standards for the year 2000 visit were a continuation of the association’s work throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s to raise the accountability bar of its member schools. Vincent Ferrandino, the executive director of NEASC perhaps best summed up the association’s position on changing with the educational times, in his column “From the Executive Director”. Ferrandino stated:

The standards we use today have changed in some, rather significant ways over the years. There is a much clearer focus on the assessment of student learning and institutional effectiveness as a theme across Commissions. Likewise, our review process at the Commission and Board of Trustees levels has become more rigorous. Any school leader who has recently undergone the self-study and visiting team process can attest to the enhanced rigor of our standards and our process. (Ferrandino, 1998, Nov. 2)

Precedence for this Study

There seemed to be little precedence for this study in the literature. The literature review indicated that there has been only one study of this sort conducted by or for the NEASC, which was the previously cited Flynn (1997) dissertation. Flynn’s research focused primarily on attitudes and perceptions of Massachusetts school leaders about the impact and value of NEASC accreditation as it relates to school accountability and reform. Flynn’s study will be of primary importance to this researcher as it provided a methodology and a survey design that could be replicated to advance this new study. Both the Flynn study and this study sought to determine perceptions and attitudes of school leaders regarding the impact and value of NEASC accreditation procedures on

school accountability and reform. The Flynn study considered this question for Massachusetts Secondary Schools in light of the fiscal limitations of Proposition 2 1/2. The current research considered this question for New Hampshire Secondary Schools in light of the accountability and reform initiatives that are currently underway, such as the state mandated District Educational Improvement Plan.

In his 1997 study Flynn (p.137) reported the following five findings that are directly related to the current research.

- 1. NEASC membership is perceived as having little value beyond the accreditation process.**
- 2. The accreditation process itself is valued by school committee persons, superintendents and principals.**
- 3. A school's accreditation status is seen as important to the life of a school, but an action adverse to accreditation or the actual loss of accreditation is far more crucial.**
- 4. The accreditation process has a direct effect on educational change.**
- 5. The community at large has little awareness or investment in the accreditation process.**

In chapter five, the conclusions of the current study will be compared to those of the Flynn study. It will be interesting to discover to what degree the perceptions of New Hampshire school leaders concerning the value and impact of the NEASC accreditation process correspond with those reported for the similar target population in Flynn's study of Massachusetts school leaders.

Summary of the Research

This dissertation deals with the attitudes and perceptions of school leaders towards the NEASC and its accreditation process. The literature review identified much historical information, and provided a clear and working definition of accreditation. It examined the use of accreditation as a means of accountability and school improvement. It traced the national standards movement and examined both the state of New Hampshire and the NEASC's response to it.

The literature review discussed how NEASC has positioned itself for the future. There was, however, little material which provided feedback concerning the impact and value of the current NEASC accreditation procedures from those who lead the accreditation process in their schools. This study, then, is an opportunity to begin to fill that void by going to the direct sources for the answers.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to develop a description of the perceptions and attitudes of New Hampshire school leaders regarding the impact and value of NEASC high school accreditation procedures from 1987 through 1997. Specifically, the study sought to elicit answers to the following five research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of respondents regarding the value and purpose of NEASC membership?
2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?
3. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?
4. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?
5. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents regarding the relationship between NEASC accreditation and DEIP?

Null Hypothesis

The research questions were addressed to test the following null hypothesis:

There will be no statistically significant differences between the mean ratings of school board members, school superintendents, and high school principals as measured in their responses to the total of the items in the attitude scale.

Limitations

The study was limited to New Hampshire high schools which had participated in an NEASC accreditation visit between the years 1987-1997. Participants were limited to school board members, superintendents, and high school principals who, at the time of this study, were connected to the identified schools.

Sources of the Data

Data for this study were collected through the use of a single survey (Appendix B) for each of the target groups. The survey contained 3 demographic items, 30 closed response items and 7 open response items.

In addition, primary sources were analyzed from the files of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. These artifacts consisted of correspondence between the director of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools and the 66 member schools selected for the purposes of this study. These data were used to develop charts indicating the increase in the number of requests for Special Progress Reports, as well as increases in the number of

schools being placed on warning or probation by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools following accreditation visits between the years 1987-1997. This artifact examination consisted of a review of selected minutes of trustee meetings and a review of selected general correspondence between the director of the secondary commission and all member schools, as well as interviews with NEASC staff.

Within the school systems selected for the study were three target groups from which the data would be collected. These groups represented the school system's leadership positions. School board members were chosen because their attitudes and perceptions greatly influence policy and fiscal support systems that are necessary to implement the accreditation process. Superintendents were chosen because they are the C.E.O. of the school system. They carry out policies, develop the vision and the goals of the system, and guide the individual components of the system. Principals were chosen because they are the educational leaders of the high school. They are part of one of the NEASC standards called administration and they are the ones most directly involved in the accreditation process.

These groups were chosen based on the author's premise that because of their respective leadership positions and responsibilities, as well as their knowledge and interest in the accreditation process, there would be a difference in the attitudes and perceptions among these New Hampshire school leaders.

Survey Design

The survey instrument used for this study was adapted from a survey instrument developed by Flynn (1997). It was designed specifically to study perceptions of school leaders about the impact and value of NEASC accreditation on Massachusetts high schools. Since the current study replicates the Flynn dissertation (in both studies, four of the research questions are the same and the respondents to the survey are school leaders), it was determined that, with modifications, Flynn's survey instrument met the needs of this study.

A common set of demographics for each of the target groups was placed at the beginning of each instrument. It sought to identify three pieces of information: the respondent's role in the school system, whether or not the respondent filled the same role during the most recent high school accreditation visit, and the respondent's high school's current accreditation status. The information received from the three demographic questions individualized the groups by roles and experience within the accreditation process. It also provided the accreditation status of the high school for each respondent. This was deemed important information to be used in determining differences in attitude between groups and in analyzing the open-ended responses between and among groups.

The instrument used in this study (Appendix B) consisted of thirty assertions which were developed to elicit responses relating to the five research questions stated earlier in this chapter. Modifications to Flynn's instrument primarily involved condensing fifty-four assertions to the thirty assertions used in

this study. This was done to eliminate any assertion that was asked twice, once as a negative statement and once as a positive statement. All negative assertions were dropped. Flynn's study involved six research questions. The current study had five research questions, four of which were the same as Flynn's questions. All assertions matched to the two research questions not included in this research were dropped. These two modifications brought the total number of common assertions to twenty three. Seven new assertions were developed to elicit information about question #5 ("What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and the DEIP?") bringing the total to thirty assertions. The number of assertions relating to each research question varied from a low of five for the first research question, to a high of seven for the fifth research question. Appendix C contains the details of the relationship between the research questions and assertions.

The seven open-ended questions were developed to give the respondents the opportunity to express more personally their beliefs about the NEASC accreditation process and how it relates to accountability and school improvement in their high schools. Three of Flynn's open-ended questions were utilized, and four were developed for this research. Each research question had one open-ended question related to it with the exception of the fifth research question which had three open-ended questions related to it. Appendix D contains the details of the relationship between the research questions and the open-ended questions.

The design required that each of the three target groups be given the same instrument to consider, including its assertions and open-ended questions. The instrument was titled Attitudinal Survey, and the responses were entered on a Likert scale. The choices of responses for each of the Likert scales were:

- SA Strongly Agree
- A Agree
- D Disagree
- SD Strongly Disagree

The following sample was provided for the respondents on the instrument.

Example:	4	3	2	1
1. NEASC membership is voluntary.	SA	A	D	SD

The directions called on the respondents to circle the response that most accurately described their current perception or attitude about each statement.

The respondents were then asked to answer the open-ended questions in a few short sentences or phrases. Respondents were invited to use additional paper if necessary.

Content Validity

Content validity of the statements chosen for the instrument was determined by a panel of four competent judges selected by Flynn. There is ample documentation of the process used by Flynn. (Flynn, 1997, p. 52-56).

Since four of the five questions in the current study were the same as the ones used in the Flynn study, for the purposes of this study it was only

necessary to test the new fifth question for content validity. Question number five of the current study was designed to determine the relationship between the NEASC accreditation process and the State of New Hampshire District Education Improvement Plan.

A panel of six judges was selected based on their knowledge of the accreditation process and their experience with it. Four judges were members of the Rye Junior High School Accreditation Steering Committee. This group was made up of three teachers and one school board member. At the time of this study this group was immersed in both the NEASC accreditation process and the requirements of the New Hampshire State Department of Education DEIP. Each of these judges had current knowledge and experience regarding research question number five. The fifth judge was chosen because of his knowledge, experience, and close relationship with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. He was also chosen because he authored the original attitudinal survey instrument. Dr. Flynn provided a unique perspective and knowledge base gained from his career experiences as researcher, Director of the NEASC Elementary Commission, superintendent of schools and high school principal. The sixth judge was a New Hampshire State Department of Education consultant in charge of minimum educational standards. Since question number five involved knowledge of the relationship between NEASC and DEIP, a member of the State Department of Education with knowledge of both was included as a judge to review the assertions for accuracy.

Judges were asked to determine if the ten assertions written to match question number five would, indeed, elicit information about this research question. There was unanimous approval of seven of the ten assertions. Three assertions were thought to be redundant or unclear and were dropped. The final attitudinal scale numbered thirty assertions.

The Study Population

The study population consisted of New Hampshire school systems with high schools which had participated in an NEASC accreditation visit between the years 1987-1997. The Commission on Public Secondary Schools maintains an accurate list of its member schools, as well as the cycles of accreditation in which those schools are involved. The researcher reviewed the files of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and determined that the schools identified in Table 3.1 were eligible to be included as participants in the process, based on dates of their evaluation visit.

Table 3.1

Schools Eligible for the Study

<u>High School</u>	<u>Date of Evaluation</u>	<u>High School</u>	<u>Date of Evaluation</u>
A. Crosby Kennett	1997	Merrimack	1990
Alton	1996	Merrimack Valley	1991
Alvirne	1993	Milford	1994
Belmont	1995	Monadnock	1996
Berlin	1990	Moultonborough	1993
Conant	1992	Nashua	1992
Concord	1993	Newfound	1996
Contoocook-Conval	1995	Newport	1994
Dover	1997	Oyster River	1997
Epping	1994	Pelham	1988
Exeter	1990	Pembroke Academy	1994
Fall Mountain	1990	Pittsfield	1990
Farmington	1993	Plymouth	1992
Franklin	1996	Portsmouth	1992
Gilford	1989	Profile	1990
Goffstown	1997	Salem	1994
Gorham	1992	Sanborn	1994
Hanover	1993	Somersworth	1994
Hillsboro-Deering	1993	Souhegan	1997
Hinsdale	1994	Spaulding	1994
Hollis/Brookline	1995	Stevens	1996
Hopkinton	1996	Sunapee	1990
Interlakes	1990	Thayer	1987
John Stark	1991	Timberlane	1988
Kearsarge	1995	White Mountain	1993
Keene	1995	Wilton-Lyndebaugh	1988
Kingswood	1988	Winnacunnet	1993
Laconia	1989	Winnisquam	1987
Lebanon	1993	Woodsville	1992
Lin-Wood	1994		
Littleton	1992		
Londonderry	1990		
Manchester Central	1993		
Manchester West	1995		
Manchester Memorial	1994		
Mascenic	1994		
Mascoma	1995		

Respondent Selection Process

In order to maximize efficiency, three copies of the survey (one each for the school board member, superintendent, and high school principal) were mailed to 57 selected superintendents representing 66 public high schools. In cases where there was more than one high school in the system, additional copies were included for each principal. The superintendent and high school principal selected for completion of the survey were obvious, because those who, at the time of the distribution of the material, held the positions of superintendent and high school principals were asked to be part of the sample. In the case of more than one high school within the system, each principal was asked to be a respondent. To determine the school board member respondent, a random selection procedure took place to ensure that every member of the population had an equal chance of being selected to be a member of the sample. Jaegar (1988) states that two principles define simple random sampling: "First, every element in the population has the same chance of being sampled. Second, selection of any one element has no influence on the chance that any other element is selected" (p.317). To ensure what Jaegar refers to as "the inherent fairness in the principles that define simple random sampling" (p.317), each superintendent was asked via an enclosed letter in the packets that were sent, to select the school board member whose last name's first initial was closest alphabetically to the first initial of the superintendent's last name. This was done to ensure equity within a limited sample.

Copies of the finalized instrument, consisting of demographic information, thirty assertions, and seven open-ended questions, were mailed to the superintendents of the school systems being sampled in October 1998. Included in the mailing was a letter of endorsement from Superintendent of Schools for SAU #50, Dr. Stephen Maio, (Appendix E) and a cover letter (Appendix F) which specifically provided the directions for the superintendent to follow for distribution of the remaining packets and for the selection of the school board member. Letters (Appendix G) explaining the study were included in all packets, as well as a self-addressed, stamped envelope to be mailed back to the researcher.

Mailing was determined to be an effective means of reaching the three target populations. As stated by Jaeger (1988), "Mail surveys have the distinct advantage of economy" (p.312). A personal reminder letter (Appendix H) was sent in early November 1998 to all of the superintendents who received the original material. Included in this letter was the number of responses the researcher had received to date, as well as the position of the person responding from the superintendent's school district. The superintendent was asked to remind those who had not completed the survey to please do so. In addition, this follow up letter served as a reminder to the superintendent to complete his/her survey if it was not done. A final reminder took place throughout mid to late November 1998. During this time the superintendent of each school district that had missing surveys was contacted personally by phone to ask for assistance in returning the outstanding surveys. Phone contacts were made by either the researcher or David Gebhardt on behalf of the researcher. Gebhardt,

in his role as consultant for the State Department of Education, had daily contact with many of the superintendents included in the sample. As a result of the phone contacts, additional surveys were mailed to several districts yielding several additional returns.

Treatment of the Quantitative Data

The survey instrument was designed to provide informational data for analysis. Each respondent had been asked to rate the thirty assertions using a four point Likert scale. The data, then, would reflect a potential 30 responses from each of the 104 participants. All of the responses were assigned a value by the statistician. Instances of non response, were coded as missing data to eliminate them from mean calculations. The data were then tabulated and the mean scores of each group were identified for each of the possible 30 responses. These results were organized to allow the researcher to examine statistics for all target populations, school board members only, superintendents only, and principals only. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized to determine the significance of difference between the perceptions of school board members, superintendents, and high school principals as measured by their responses to the total of the items in the attitude scale. To compare the responses between the target populations, as they pertained to the research questions, hypothesis testing took place. According to statistical theory, the hypothesis is always stated as a null hypothesis which is a statement that no difference exists between the populations being compared. (Huck, Cormier & Bounds, 1974, p.40). The results of the statistical test are stated in terms of

probability that the null hypothesis is false. To do this, the researcher selected a level of significance of .05 to define how unlikely the data must be before the researcher can reject the null hypothesis. According to Huck, Cormier and Bounds, .05 is the most common level of significance in hypothesis testing (p.241,242). The .05 level of significance translates to a .95 level of confidence. Results of the analysis of the quantitative data is presented in the following chapter.

Treatment of the Qualitative Data

The survey instrument contained seven open-ended questions which were designed to obtain more subjective data from the respondents and to provide a more comprehensive and personal reaction to the assertions beyond the limitations of the quantitative approach. Information collected from the open-ended questions was analyzed and catalogued by the researcher according to frequency of response. This information provided the researcher a wider opportunity for interpretation and description of the respondents' perceptions of the research questions.

Summary

This chapter has sought to examine the methodology used in this study. The research questions and null hypotheses were presented. The design of the survey was presented and described. The study population, and rationale for it, was presented. The methods of data distribution were explained and the treatment of both the quantitative and qualitative data was examined. The next chapter will present the analysis of the data to determine the perceptions and

**attitudes of New Hampshire school board members, superintendents of schools,
and high school principals in relation to the impact and value of New Hampshire
high school accreditation.**

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

This study sought to determine the value of participation in the NEASC. The purpose of this study was to determine to what degree the NEASC process is valued by superintendents, high school principals, and selected school board members of all New Hampshire school districts which have high school membership in the NEASC. Further, the study examined the relationship between the NEASC process and the process used to develop the local District Educational Improvement Plan (DEIP).

In this chapter, an analysis of the data gathered from the 104 surveys used for this study will be presented. The study examined the following five research questions:

- 1. What are the perceptions of respondents regarding the value and purpose of NEASC membership?**
- 2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?**
- 3. What are the perceptions and attitudes of respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?**
- 4. What are the perceptions and attitudes of respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?**

5. What are the perceptions and attitudes of respondents regarding the relationship between NEASC accreditation and DEIP?

The survey included thirty assertions. Each respondent was asked to respond to each assertion using a four point Likert scale. In addition, each respondent was asked to provide written responses to seven open-ended questions. The thirty assertions and the seven open-ended questions were each related to one of the five research questions.

The research questions were addressed to test the following hypothesis:

There will be no statistically significant differences between the ratings of school board members, school superintendents, and high school principals as measured in their responses to the total of the items in the attitude scale.

The first section of this chapter will review the demographic information of the respondents as recorded on the surveys. The second section of this chapter will present the results of the testing of the hypothesis. The third section will discuss the research findings as determined by the responses to the thirty assertions on the survey by the three groups of respondents. It will also discuss the answers and comments of the respondents to the seven open-ended questions included on the survey.

Analysis of the Demographic Information

Demographic data collected regarding the survey participants is presented in Table 4.1. The data includes: title of position held within the school system, whether or not the respondent held the same position at the time of the most

recent high school accreditation visit, and the current accreditation status of the respondent's high school.

A total of 185 surveys were mailed to 57 school districts. The surveys were sent to the superintendents of schools in each school district who were designated as the contact persons through whom the surveys would be distributed to the respondents. One hundred and five surveys were returned, representing a 56.8% response. One return was not usable.

Of the 57 superintendents surveyed, 38 responded (65% response rate), yielding 37 usable surveys. Of the 66 principals surveyed, 36 responded (55% response rate), and all were usable. Of the 62 school board members surveyed, 31 responded (50% response rate), and again all were usable. A total of 104 usable responses were received, representing 56.2% of the total distributed.

Table 4.1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

<u>Population Surveyed</u>	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>School Board Members</u>	<u>Superintendents</u>	<u>High School Principals</u>
	(N = 104) 100%	(N = 31) 29.8%	(N = 37) 35.6%	(N = 36) 34.6%
Held this position during the most recent high school accreditation visit	52.9%	81.0%	56.8%	25.2%
Status: High School Accreditation	74.0%	71.0%	70.3%	80.5%
Status: Accreditation with Warning	18.3%	19.3%	21.6%	13.9%
Status: Accreditation with Probation	7.7%	9.7%	8.1%	5.6%

Hypothesis Testing Results

The hypothesis sought to determine the level of difference between the responses of the three target populations (school board members, school superintendents, and high school principals) to the assertions. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized to determine the significance of difference between the perceptions of the target groups. Significance at the .05 level was utilized to test for comparisons.

Hypothesis

There will be no statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of school board members, school superintendents, and high school principals as measured in their responses to the total of the items in the attitude scale.

An ANOVA test was conducted to test the null hypothesis. The results, presented in Table 4.2 showed that at the $p < .05$ level, school board members, school superintendents, and high school principals differed significantly in their responses to the assertions.

Table 4.2

ANOVA Source

<u>Source</u>	<u>SS</u>	<u>Df</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>P</u>
Roles	.413	2	.21	3.80*	<.0316
Error	4.72	87	.05		

*Indicates significance at the $p < .05$ level

The critical value is 3.07 at the .05 significance level. The calculated F value of 3.80 exceeds that, thus F is significant at the .05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected as some differences exist between the three groups.

A Post Hoc Analysis was utilized to assess the validity of the ANOVA outcome and to differentiate the internal variability of the source data by examining significance or importance of mean differences between subgroups. The Post Hoc Analysis utilized the Tukey Honestly Significant Differences (HSD) standardization of significance method.

Table 4.3

Post Hoc Analysis

Sources	Mean Comparison		
	G1(M=2.89) School Board	G2(M=3.00) Superintendent	G3(M=3.05) Principal
G1(M=2.89) School Board	-	0.11	0.16
G2(M=3.00) Superintendent	-	-	0.05
G3(M=3.05) Principal	-	-	-

Alpha (α) = 0.05

Table 4.4

HSD Pair Wise Comparison*

Sources	Q Obtained	Q Critical	Data Comparison
G1 vs. G2	2.602	3.36	Important
G1 vs. G3	3.818	3.36	Significant
G2 vs. G3	1.215	3.36	Not significant

*Critical Value of the Studentized Range (Q) Distribution (Pagano, 1998, Table G)

Using three levels of data comparisons (statistically significant, important, not significant) the pair wise comparison yielded statistically significant difference between the school board members and high school principal subgroups. The difference yielded between school board and superintendent subgroups, although not statistically significant, is still demonstrative of an important difference. The rationale for these findings will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Research Findings

This section will report the findings of the five research questions as determined by the responses of the target groups to the thirty assertions. The relationship between research questions and assertions is provided in Appendix C. The mean score for each of the assertions is shown first by target groups, and then by research questions. To determine the findings for each research question, the mean score of the responses to all assertions relating to that question by each target group was computed. This section concludes with an examination of the descriptive data collected from the open ended questions as

matched to the research questions. The relationship between research questions and open ended questions is provided in Appendix D.

Table 4.5
Assertions 1-30 Analysis of Means and Standard Deviation

School Board Members			Superintendents			Principals			Total
Assertion#	Mean	Std. Dev.	#	Mean	Std. Dev.	#	Mean	Std. Dev.	
1	3.00	0.775	1	3.06	0.715	1	3.14	0.639	3.07
2	3.26	0.773	2	3.35	0.633	2	3.50	0.561	3.37
3	3.23	0.669	3	3.44	0.607	3	3.56	0.607	3.41
4	2.94	0.727	4	3.14	0.822	4	3.22	0.632	3.10
5	2.76	0.577	5	2.80	0.740	5	3.00	0.632	2.85
6	2.94	0.629	6	3.30	0.702	6	3.31	0.525	3.18
7	2.74	0.526	7	2.91	0.702	7	3.30	0.521	2.98
8	3.10	0.746	8	2.94	0.826	8	3.01	0.660	3.02
9	2.97	0.490	9	3.03	0.664	9	3.23	0.490	3.08
10	2.86	0.756	10	2.97	0.941	10	3.01	0.624	2.95
11	3.08	0.660	11	3.24	0.641	11	3.26	0.579	3.19
12	2.61	0.761	12	2.61	0.688	12	2.85	0.725	2.69
13	2.95	0.926	13	3.13	0.852	13	3.11	0.854	3.06
14	2.93	0.640	14	3.23	0.649	14	3.30	0.615	3.15
15	2.86	0.651	15	3.06	0.583	15	3.03	0.736	2.98
16	2.88	0.728	16	2.89	0.747	16	3.17	0.561	2.98
17	3.13	0.730	17	2.99	0.722	17	3.11	0.575	3.08
18	2.93	0.799	18	3.34	0.639	18	2.97	0.695	3.08
19	3.30	0.466	19	3.34	0.684	19	3.42	0.500	3.35
20	2.68	0.791	20	3.07	0.709	20	3.08	0.649	2.94
21	2.45	0.674	21	2.65	0.791	21	2.75	0.649	2.62
22	2.70	0.470	22	2.63	0.660	22	2.68	0.599	2.67
23	2.60	0.675	23	2.71	0.676	23	2.67	0.632	2.66
24	2.89	0.602	24	3.14	0.648	24	3.00	0.586	3.01
25	2.73	0.785	25	2.74	0.649	25	2.78	0.591	2.75
26	2.97	0.885	26	2.76	0.663	26	2.67	0.736	2.32
27	3.16	0.688	27	3.22	0.760	27	3.11	0.667	3.16
28	2.79	0.675	28	2.91	0.612	28	2.78	0.540	2.83
29	2.87	0.783	29	2.85	0.725	29	3.03	0.568	2.92
30	2.45	0.685	30	2.63	0.948	30	2.85	0.657	2.64

Treatment of the Quantitative Data

Research Question Number One - What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?

The findings for the first research question are based on responses to the following five assertions:

2. Membership in the NEASC is a benefit to our high school.
3. A purpose of the NEASC is to establish high standards for its member secondary schools.
6. Participation in the NEASC's accreditation process has had an impact on our school's educational program.
8. Participation in the NEASC's accreditation process has benefits for our entire school system.
19. A goal of the NEASC is to foster school improvement in its member schools.

Table 4.6

Analysis of means for assertions relating to Research Question #1

	S.B.	Supt.	Prin.	Total
Assertion 2	3.26	3.35	3.50	3.37
Assertion 3	3.23	3.44	3.56	3.41
Assertion 6	2.94	3.30	3.31	3.18
Assertion 8	3.10	2.94	3.01	3.02
Assertion 19	3.30	3.34	3.42	3.35

Table 4.7

Research Question #1
What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?

Assertions 2, 3, 6, 8, and 19

	School Board Members	Superintendents	Principals	Total
Mean	3.17	3.27	3.36	3.27
Standard Deviation	0.147	0.194	0.217	

When all responses are taken into consideration, it is clear that there is an understood value and purpose to NEASC membership among the three groups. Each relates the purpose of the NEASC to be the establishment of high standards for its member secondary schools with the goal of fostering school improvement. Each relates membership in the NEASC to the acceptance and maintenance of high standards as well as a commitment to school improvement. Membership in NEASC is viewed as beneficial to the school, school system and community.

Of the three target groups, principals consistently had the highest mean score for assertions related to Research Question #1, with the exception of *Assertion #8, Participation in the NEASC accreditation process has benefits for our entire school system*. This assertion alone asked respondents to rate the impact of NEASC accreditation on the entire school system, and not solely on the high school. Superintendents, who are in the best position to know how the NEASC accreditation process impacts the entire school system, had the lowest mean score (2.94), followed by principals (3.01) and school board members

(3.10). The data support that superintendents, who are the closest to the "entire school system," while still responding positively, least value the impact of the accreditation process on the entire school system. This is borne out in the open-ended responses to be discussed later. Principals also rated Assertion #8 lower than they did any other assertion related to Research Question #1. The difference in the mean scores of target groups for Assertion #8 is important as one of the goals of this study is to determine the value of NEASC as a tool for District Education Improvement Planning.

While all mean scores are high for Research Question #1, the mean scores increase from 3.17 for the school board members, to 3.27 for superintendents, and reach a high of 3.36 for high school principals. Since all five assertions reflect positive aspects about NEASC membership, it can be stated that of the three target groups, principals have the most positive feeling about the value and purpose of NEASC membership.

Research Question Number Two - What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation process?

The findings for the second research question are based on responses to the following six assertions:

1. The accreditation process has raised community awareness of the strengths and needs of our school.
10. The accreditation process demonstrated that the entire accreditation method was worthwhile.

11. The accreditation process provided information on which to make sound educational changes in our school.
12. The accreditation process provided a blueprint for educational reform in our high school.
16. The accreditation process effected positive change in our high school's educational program.
20. The accreditation visit and report accentuated the strengths of our high school.

Table 4.8

**Analysis of mean scores for assertions relating to
Research Question #2**

	S.B.	Supt.	Prin.	Total
Assertion 1	3.00	3.06	3.14	3.07
Assertion 10	2.86	2.97	3.01	2.95
Assertion 11	3.08	3.24	3.26	3.19
Assertion 12	2.61	2.61	2.85	2.69
Assertion 16	2.88	2.89	3.17	2.98
Assertion 20	2.68	3.07	3.08	2.94

Table 4.9

Research Question #2
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?

Assertions 1, 10, 11, 12, 16, and 20

	School Board Members	Superintendents	Principals	Total
Mean	2.85	2.97	3.09	2.97
Standard Deviation	0.180	0.213	0.143	

It is evident that all of the groups believed the NEASC accreditation process to be both positive and beneficial.

The respondents agreed that the accreditation process raised community awareness of the strengths and needs of the high school. They agreed that the process provided information on which to make sound educational changes in their schools, and that the results of the process could be used as a "blueprint for educational change." They also agreed that the accreditation process effected positive change in their high schools' educational programming and that the entire accreditation process was worthwhile.

Five of the six assertions for Research Question #2 received a high positive response. Assertion #12 (*The accreditation process provided a blueprint for educational reform in our high school.*) stands apart from the other five assertions in that mean scores for each of the target populations, while still positive, were much lower for this assertion than for any other assertion related to Question #2. All scores for this assertion were below the mean of the total

2.97. The mean score for school board and superintendent responses was 2.61, while the mean score for principals was 2.85. The use of the word "blueprint" in the assertion implies to the respondent that the accreditation process is the main vehicle of school reform for the high school. The positive nature of the responses indicates that the process is seen as a plan for school improvement rather than a one time evaluation of the high school.

Although Assertion #11, which stated that the accreditation process provided information that could be used to make sound educational change within the school, is very closely related to Assertion #12, the difference in the target groups' total mean score for Assertion #11 (3.19), compared with the target groups' total mean score for Assertion #12 (2.69), suggests a notable difference. It focuses a distinction between a process which has as its goal to solely provide information, and a process that when finished will provide a "blueprint" for educational change. The use of the word "blueprint" raised the stakes as to the importance of the accreditation process for educational change. When the respondents considered the accreditation process as the "blueprint" or set of plans to bring about educational change, their mean scores, while still very positive, do not reach the level of their scores when considering the accreditation process as solely one of providing information on which to make sound judgments for educational change. One of the goals of this study is to determine the role of the accreditation process in developing a school improvement plan. The data confirm that more respondents view the accreditation process as one

of supporting school improvement rather than as a stand alone "blueprint" for school improvement.

Research Question #2, like the first research question, asks respondents to react to positive statements about the accreditation process as it related to the high school. Again the results show that of the three groups, principals have the most positive feelings towards the accreditation visit and report.

This finding is not surprising as principals and school staff spend up to eighteen months preparing for the visiting team. Their preparation consists of a complete review of the school's practices and procedures as measured in a self-study against the NEASC standards. The visiting team evaluates the self-study through a three and one half day on-site visit. The visiting team report is eagerly awaited by the principal and the staff. The accreditation visit and report are very important to the principal and staff, primarily because of the amount of time and energy which they have invested in the accreditation process. They have the ownership. It is from the accreditation visit and report that accreditation status and the follow up improvement plan is achieved.

As in Research Question #1, the mean scores for Question #2 show positive gains from the school board members' score of 2.85 to the superintendents' score of 2.97, and reach a high of 3.09 for the principals' score. Question #2 asked respondents for their perceptions of the accreditation process. All assertions were related to high school accreditation. Based on the mean scores it can be concluded that those who are most invested in the process respond most positively about the process.

Research Question Number Three - What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?

The findings for the third research question are based on responses to the following six assertions:

- 13. The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is a source of pride to me.
- 14. The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is derived from our high school's ability to meet NEASC standards.
- 15. The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is derived from our high school's ability to maintain consistent educational standards.
- 23. The accreditation status granted by the NEASC upgraded the expectations of the community for our schools.
- 26. Our accreditation status has enabled our students to be accepted at top rated colleges.
- 27. The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is valued by our school system.

Table 4.10

Analysis of mean scores for assertions relating to Research Question #3

	S.B.	Supt.	Prin.	Total
Assertion 13	2.95	3.13	3.11	3.06
Assertion 14	2.93	3.23	3.30	3.15
Assertion 15	2.86	3.06	3.03	2.98
Assertion 23	2.60	2.71	2.67	2.66
Assertion 26	2.97	2.76	2.67	2.80
Assertion 27	3.16	3.22	3.11	3.16

Table 4.11

Research Question #3
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status by the NEASC?

Assertions 13, 14, 15, 23, 26, and 27

	School Board Members	Superintendents	Principals	Total
Mean	2.91	3.02	2.98	2.97
Standard Deviation	0.183	0.229	0.257	

For Research Questions #1, 2, 4, and 5, the principals' total mean scores in response to the assertions were the highest of the three target groups.

Responses to the assertions for Question #3 do not follow the same pattern as for the other research questions. The assertions for Research Question #3 were designed to elicit from the respondents their perceptions of the accreditation status granted by NEASC. The mean scores reported in Table 4.11 show that superintendents rated the status as most important, with the principals' total mean score being the second highest of the three target groups.

On four of the six individual assertions used to gather information for Question #3, superintendents registered the highest mean score. Of those four assertions, #13 and #27 asked the respondents to react to the value that the accreditation status held for them and their school system. While each group had very positive scores for these assertions, the evidence suggests that superintendents value the status received through the NEASC accreditation more than the other groups.

While the status of accreditation is important to principals, it is the whole process of accreditation that is more important to them. It is the process that brings the staff together in the self-study, and it is the visiting team that builds the action plan for improvement. While all principals want to have a favorable accreditation status, it is the principals who are most likely to appreciate the process of accreditation, rather than valuing status as merely an end product. Principals understand that if full accreditation is granted by NEASC, then it must be maintained. Improvements must be made if something less than full accreditation is granted.

The higher mean scores for the superintendents' target group on Question #3 suggest that as spokespersons for the school department to the school board and community, superintendents find it helpful to view the accreditation status as an end product which signifies a lot of hard work on the part of the staff, and validates that the local high school is a quality school that has been measured by NEASC standards.

For all research questions, school board members attained the lowest scores when the responses to the assertions were totaled. On the rating sheets, some school board members did not respond to some assertions noting that they did not have enough background to fully understand the accreditation process. The open-ended questions also revealed that of the three target groups, school board members least understood the accreditation process. This factor contributes to school board members having the lowest mean scores for

all research questions when the total mean scores of all assertions relating to each research question is determined.

For Question #3, principals rated Assertion #14 higher than the other target groups. Assertion #14 probed respondents about their knowledge of how accreditation is derived. The principals' strong mean score to this assertion adds to the evidence that as a group, they have the most knowledge of the process.

School board members rated Assertion #26 higher than did the other two target groups. The assertion was designed in such a way that the lower the mean scores, the better understanding of the accreditation process. Assertion #26 asked respondents to react to the following statement: *Our accreditation status has enabled our students to be accepted at top rated colleges.* For this assertion, school board members had a mean score of 2.97; superintendents, 2.76; and principals, 2.67. The total mean was 2.80.

When interviewed, Janet Allison, Assistant Director of the NEASC Secondary Public School Commission, said, "There is no college requirement or direct connection between NEASC and college admission." She went on to say, "There is a perception among the public that coming from an accredited high school is a condition of getting accepted at top colleges, and from NEASC's standpoint, that is a good thing." The breakdown of the mean scores for Assertion #26 again supports the evidence that those closest to the process best understand and appreciate it.

When all responses are taken into consideration, it is clear that all groups value the accreditation status granted by NEASC. It is also clear that there is a

different level of understanding of the accreditation process and its purpose among the groups.

Research Question Number Four - What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?

The findings for the fourth research question are based on responses to the following six assertions:

- 5. The NEASC's Standards of Accreditation are the criteria for school improvement.
- 17. The accreditation process served to make the community aware of the needs of the school.
- 21. The accreditation process has helped our school with public approval.
- 25. The community had strong interest in the results of the accreditation process.
- 28. The accreditation process has improved education in the community.
- 29. The accreditation process itself enables our high school to be accountable to the public.

Table 4.12

**Analysis of mean scores for assertions relating to
Research Question #4**

	Board	Supt.	Prin.	Total
Assertion 5	2.76	2.80	3.00	2.85
Assertion 17	3.13	2.99	3.11	3.08
Assertion 21	2.45	2.65	2.75	2.62
Assertion 25	2.73	2.74	2.78	2.75
Assertion 28	2.79	2.91	2.78	2.83
Assertion 29	2.87	2.85	3.03	2.92

Table 4.13

Research Question #4

**What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the
accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the
community?**

Assertions 5, 17, 21, 25, 28, and 29

	School Board Members	Superintendents	Principals	Total
Mean	2.79	2.82	2.91	2.84
Standard Deviation	0.220	0.121	0.156	

There was agreement by all groups that the accreditation process brings about educational change. Respondents agreed that the standards used for the accreditation process are the criteria for school improvement, and that the accreditation process improved the education program at their local high schools. Each group supported the assertion that the accreditation process

served to make the community aware of the needs of the school, win public approval, and could be used to hold the high school accountable to its public.

Principals are the only group whose mean score was above the total of the means' score for this research question. This would indicate that principals have a stronger belief than do school board members and superintendents in the ability of the NEASC accreditation process to bring about educational change within their community.

Assertions #5, 17, 21, 25 and 29 ask respondents to rate the assertions based on their knowledge of the accreditation process and the effect that NEASC school accreditation has on the community. Only Assertion #28 asks respondents to rate the impact of the accreditation process on improving education in the community, with no reference to the school. This was the only assertion on which principals had a lower score than did superintendents. When it comes to valuing the impact of accreditation at the school level, principals have attributed clear and consistent high scores. As was the case in Assertion #8 (for Research Question #2), which asked respondents to react to the benefits of the NEASC's accreditation process for the entire school system, principals were less positive in their response than were superintendents. This indicated that principals have a better understanding of the accreditation process at the high school level including how it impacts school improvement. What is less clear is the high school principal's understanding of how the accreditation process has improved education in the community at large, or as in the case of Assertion #8, how the accreditation process has impacted the entire school system.

The responses to Assertions #28 and #8 support the finding that principals have the best understanding of the high school accreditation process, and superintendents have the best understanding of how the accreditation process impacts the entire school system and improves education in the entire community. Superintendents take a more global view of the educational system than do principals. Superintendents serve as the CEO of the school system. It is understandable that as a group, superintendents would not have the same working knowledge of the accreditation process as do the principals.

School board members consistently score the lowest on assertions that require knowledge of the accreditation process. Some school board members did not answer some of the assertions because they felt they didn't have the knowledge or experience to react to a particular assertion.

Research Question Number Five - What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and the DEIP?

The findings of the fifth research question are based on responses to the following seven assertions:

4. The accreditation process is an integral part of the school's improvement plans for growth and development across the curriculum.
7. NEASC accreditation is consistent with the District Education Improvement Plan.
9. System-wide educational improvement plans include the NEASC recommendations.
18. The DEIP is used for school improvement.

22. The NEASC accreditation self-improvement component will be used as the DEIP response.
24. The NEASC accreditation process is used for school improvement.
30. The accreditation process has had more impact on our high school program than the NH DEIP.

Table 4.14

**Analysis of means for assertions relating to
Research Question #5**

	Board	Supt.	Prin.	Total
Assertion 4	2.94	3.14	3.22	3.10
Assertion 7	2.74	2.91	3.30	2.98
Assertion 9	2.97	3.03	3.23	3.08
Assertion 18	2.93	3.34	2.97	3.08
Assertion 22	2.70	2.63	2.68	2.67
Assertion 24	2.89	3.14	3.00	3.01
Assertion 30	2.45	2.63	2.85	2.64

Table 4.15

Research Question #5

What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and the DEIP?

Assertions 4, 7, 9, 18, 22, 24, and 30

	School Board Members	Superintendents	Principals	Total
Mean	2.80	2.97	3.04	2.94
Standard Deviation	0.187	0.269	0.227	

When the mean scores for Assertion #18, *The DEIP is used for school improvement* are compared to those of Assertion #24, *The NEASC accreditation*

process is used for school improvement only the principals rate NEASC higher as a school improvement model. This supports the finding that superintendents and school board members are more concerned with district improvement than of improvement at a single school. Principals who have the most invested in the accreditation process and its effect on their school, consistently rate NEASC accreditation higher than DEIP as a process of school improvement.

The mean scores for Assertion #7, *NEASC accreditation is consistent with the District Education Improvement Plan*, show that of the three target groups, only the principals rate this statement higher than the total of the mean for this assertion. The difference in mean scores for this assertion supports the finding that there is not agreement among school leaders about the relationship between NEASC accreditation and DEIP.

That principals see a connection between the two improvement processes is supported in the mean scores of Assertion #9, *System-wide educational improvement plans include the NEASC recommendations*. Here again, principals rate this concept higher than do superintendents and school board members. When the three target groups were asked which improvement process had more impact on the high school program, similar results are recorded, principals consistently rate NEASC accreditation, both as a high school improvement plan and as one that interfaces with the district plan, higher than do superintendents and school board members.

It is revealing to note that when asked about the two improvement processes and their impact on the high school (Assertion #30) superintendents

and school board members rated DEIP higher than principals, even though the assertion was asking respondents about the impact of the process on one school and not on the district.

When all assertions are taken in total, it is clear that all groups view the NEASC accreditation process as a vehicle for school improvement. It is also clear that each group has a different understanding of the impact the NEASC accreditation has on the high school and as a component of the District Education Improvement Plan.

Once again the mean scores for Research Question #5 show an increase beginning with the school boards' mean score of 2.80, continuing with the superintendents' mean score of 2.97, and reaching the highest mean score of 3.04 for the principals' group. This would indicate that of the three groups surveyed, principals see the most benefit of the NEASC process for school improvement.

Treatment of the Qualitative Data

Participants in this study were invited to respond to the open ended questions in order to give them an opportunity to express their personal feelings and perceptions about the accreditation process. Among school board members, 87% of the participants responded to the open ended questions. That percentage increased to 92% for superintendents. In the principal group, 100% of the participants responded to the open ended questions.

The survey instrument contained seven open-ended questions. At least one open-ended question supported each of the research questions.

Information collected from the open-ended questions was analyzed and catalogued by the researcher according to frequency of response. This information provided the researcher a wider opportunity for interpretation and description of the respondents' perceptions of the research question.

Research Question Number One - What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?

The findings of the first research question are based on the responses to open-ended question #5, *What is the value and purpose of membership in the NEASC?*

Table 4.16

Open Ended Question #5
Percentage of responses by category for each target group.

<u>Category</u>	<u>N=27</u> <u>School Board</u>	<u>N=33</u> <u>Superintendent</u>	<u>N=36</u> <u>Principal</u>
Positive	67%	79%	92%
Negative	11%	9%	0%
Uncertain	22%	12%	8%

N= Number of respondents by group who responded to the open-ended questions.

No response was recorded as uncertain.

This question elicited a variety of responses, the majority of which focused on the importance of having the high school measured against a set of commonly accepted high standards. All groups frequently expressed the value of the self-study and peer review components of the accreditation process. Another consistently stated purpose of membership in NEASC by all groups was

that an accredited high school was a benefit to their students, particularly when it came to college admissions. Many in each group recognized the value of having a school in “accredited” status, citing this as an assurance to the community that their high school is recognized as a school of quality. Other concepts common to the NEASC and its accreditation process, which were identified as having value were: validation of the school’s performance, accountability, school improvement planning, the objectivity of an outside monitoring body, benchmarking where the school is and where the school needs to improve in relation to the standards of membership, and the overall concept of recognition for the high school.

School board members' responses

School board members tended to link the value and purpose of membership to accountability based on a review of the school practices by an outside agency. One school board member wrote, “It is at least one time in the system when someone else views our growth - an impartial evaluation of where we are at.” Another respondent stated that the purpose of NEASC membership is “to get an objective look at your school”. A third school board member stated that the purpose and value of NEASC membership is that, “it helps schools see themselves through self-study and provides those extra outsider eyes to see areas we are blind to because we are too close to it. It is a Quality Assurance Tool.” School board members made a connection between the purpose of membership and the quality of education for the students. One respondent stated that, “Accreditation adds value to our school’s diploma and our student’s

education." Several commented that membership in NEASC allows students to graduate from an accredited high school. Another common theme of those within the school board group included that NEASC membership gave them an opportunity to lobby for funding. A final purpose of NEASC membership cited by several school board members was its value of quality assurance. As one of the respondents said, "It can be seen as a seal of approval to report to district taxpayers that we have met the mark."

There were three responses from the school board members which indicated that membership in NEASC provided little value. Among those responses were the following statements, "Not much, in our school system we use membership to try and get taxpayers to fund programs," and "I see no value in membership in an organization that has no safeguards against union strong arm tactics." Finally, one respondent simply stated, "It has less and less value as time goes on."

Sixty-seven percent of the school board respondents registered positive comments concerning the value and purpose of NEASC membership. Eleven percent responded with negative comments and twenty-two percent of the respondents indicated that they were uncertain as to the value and purpose of NEASC membership. This response rating makes it clear that almost one out of four school board members in this study does not have an understanding of the value and purpose of membership in NEASC.

Superintendents' responses

A large number of superintendents indicated that the value of membership lies in credentialing, giving the community the opportunity to see that the accredited school measures positively when compared with its peers. There was a strong sense that accreditation is a measure of school quality, and that "the NEASC provides benchmarks to strive for and provides independent feedback on whether we are meeting these benchmarks." Several superintendents wrote about the prestige, motivation, affirmation, public credibility and professional pride associated with accreditation.

A superintendent from a school district which has a high school on probation wrote, "The purpose is educational improvement. It has been valuable for that, but the impact for educational improvement has come mainly from the community's concern that loss of accreditation might have an effect on college admissions. NEASC is seen in our community mostly as a large hammer suspended over the school." This statement speaks to what several superintendents alluded to in their responses which is the negative impact of not being accredited serves as a strong motivation to value the process. A large number of superintendents tied value and purpose of membership to college acceptances for students. One superintendent sees accreditation as "an insurance program for parents and students with regard to college admissions."

There were a few negative extended replies. Two superintendents replied "not sure," and one superintendent stated, "very little other than promoting the myth that if you are not accredited by NEASC, your students will not get

accepted into college.” Seventy-nine percent of the superintendents responding to open-ended question #5 registered positive comments concerning the value and purpose of NEASC membership. Nine percent responded with negative comments and twelve percent were uncertain as to the value and purpose of NEASC membership.

Principals' responses

The majority of principals cited that the value of NEASC membership was that it provided consistent standards by which to be measured. The maintenance of high standards common to all was the central benefit to membership in the NEASC. In addition, they noted that it pushed the school to move forward. One principal remarked, “It provides a yardstick by which to insure that we are moving forward in step with effective schools' research and practices.” A common remark was that the value of NEASC membership is “to maintain standards that are consistent with schools in the New England area.” A number of responses identified that membership in the NEASC validated the schools programs and practices for the community. Another stated purpose of membership was that it served as a vehicle for college admission. Graduating from an “accredited” high school is important for a student seeking college admission. Several principals saw the self-study as the most important benefit of membership. One principal responded, “Forcing the self evaluation may be the most important thing.” There were some personal reactions among the principals equating membership with validation, accountability, school improvement, credibility, pride, striving for excellence and status.

There were also some uncertain reactions among the principals. One stated that he was unsure of the value of membership. Another said, "I'm no longer sure - the process as seen by the public is somewhat of a myth or paper tiger." Finally, one principal overviewed the purpose and value of membership in NEASC in the following way, "Aside from the many valuable educational requirements that the school must follow, it keeps the politicians, and policymakers honest."

Ninety-two percent of the principals responding to Open-Ended Question #5 registered positive comments concerning the value and purpose of NEASC membership. Zero percent responded with negative comments and eight percent were uncertain as to the value and purpose of NEASC membership. It is a clear finding from the open-ended responses that principals feel the most positive about the value and purpose of NEASC membership, followed by superintendents, and then school board members. Based on the percentage of uncertain responses in each group, it can be stated that with only eight percent expressing uncertainty about the purpose of NEASC membership compared to twelve percent of the superintendents and twenty-two percent of school board members, principals have a better understanding of the purpose of NEASC membership.

Research question Number Two - What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation process?

The findings of the second research question are based on the responses to Open-Ended Question #1, *What impact has the NEASC process had on your high school?*

Table 4.17

Open-Ended Question #1
Percentage of responses by category for each target group.

<u>Category</u>	<u>N=27</u> <u>School Board</u>	<u>N=33</u> <u>Superintendent</u>	<u>N=36</u> <u>Principal</u>
Positive	81%	76%	94%
Negative	7%	18%	6%
Uncertain	11%	6%	0%

N=Number of respondents by group who responded to the open-ended questions.

No response was recorded as uncertain.

All groups responded very favorably to this question concerning the impact of the accreditation process on their high school. Principals and school board members were particularly strong in their confirmation of positive impact resulting from the accreditation process. Superintendents were positive, but not to the same degree of intensity as the other two groups. Many respondents personalized this question with local impacts which occurred as a result of the accreditation process.

School board members' responses

Examples of the impact of the accreditation process found among the school board members' responses were: facility additions, being alerted to shortcomings of the school, forcing faculty and the community to look at themselves and their school, team building, an opportunity to involve the community, and having a look at the school from the point of view of an outside perspective.

One school board member summed up the feeling of many by responding that the process was an "opportunity to look at our strengths and weaknesses and examine the purpose behind our educational mission." Several respondents referred to the raising of community awareness and the help it has provided in addressing building needs. One school board member said, "After two different NEASC reports noted that we needed an auditorium - this information helped get our bond issue passed and we now have a beauty." Many of the responses centered on the positive impact related to involving the community in the process. One school board member stated that, "This process leads to involvement of the citizens who will then be supportive of the environment their taxes built for our children."

The few school board members who described a negative impact of the accreditation process on their high school cited, "a great deal of work for a handful of people for eighteen months and political fallout from the community for a school that was put on probation."

Superintendents' responses

Superintendents identified fiscal and resource issues, community awareness, the identification of legitimate issues for school improvement, benchmarking school programs, validation of a school's strengths and weaknesses, and the involvement of teachers in a worthwhile self-evaluative process as important impacts of the process.

Two superintendents discussed the potential for a principal or a vocal minority of teachers to promote a negative agenda. One called the process flawed citing that it is too subjective. Another respondent said, "It invites staff members to introduce items that are more collectively associated to collective bargaining than educational reform." For the most part, superintendents took the position that the impact on their high school was positive and resulted in school improvement. A study of Table 4.17 shows that 18% of the superintendents responded that the accreditation process had a negative impact on the high school. This data supports the finding for the closed response assertions relating to Question #1, that superintendents, while supportive of the NEASC process, see the least value in the process.

Principals' responses

Some of the impact of the accreditation process found among principals' responses were: school improvement, self evaluation, validation of the work being done at the school, sense of pride, collaboration between staff members, improved budget requests, and resolving facility issues. Two new principals lauded the process because, as one stated, " personally speaking, when I

arrived at my new school, the report gave me an excellent starting place for (1) learning the needs of the school, and (2) establishing my agenda and entry plan.”

By far the most consistent impact noted among principals centered around school improvement. One response, in particular, which summed up the feelings of many principals was, “The process provides an opportunity to ‘step back’ and examine professional practices, philosophies, goals, etc. To hold what we do and why we do it up to the light of reality.”

Another common theme in the responses was the “team building” that took place during the process. It is captured in this example, “The self study has forced us to take a good look at our practices and develop plans for improvement that involve all faculty members and staff. More often than not, improvement efforts are top-driven.” While principals overwhelmingly viewed the accreditation process as having a very positive impact, follow up was an area of the process that was considered a weakness by a few principals. This sentiment was expressed in the following way by one principal, “I made the NEASC report and follow-up a big focus, but the arrival of a new superintendent in year two of the follow up activities caused his initiatives to take priority. Sometimes they dovetailed, but NEASC took a back seat.”

Research Question Number Three - What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?

The findings of the third research question are based on the responses to open-ended question #3, *How does the accreditation status influence or change community attitudes and perceptions about your high school?*

Table 4.18

Open-Ended Question #3
Percentage of responses by category for each target group.

<u>Category</u>	<u>N=27</u> <u>School Board</u>	<u>N=33</u> <u>Superintendent</u>	<u>N=36</u> <u>Principal</u>
Positive	70%	79%	81%
Negative	11%	9%	0%
Uncertain	19%	12%	19%

N=Number of respondents by group who responded to the open-ended questions.

No response was recorded as uncertain.

School board members' responses

The question of a high school's accreditation status, and the effect of that status on the community, generated many strong responses among all groups, but especially strong were the school board members' reactions. "In my community, people would not tolerate anything other than full accreditation - heads would roll" or "I believe loss of accreditation would be devastating to a community." The impact of a negative accreditation report was blamed by one school board member as the reason the town adopted Senate Bill #2, a restrictive budget process allowing citizens more control over the bottom line of

the school budget. One school board member called any status, other than “fully accredited,” a terrible black mark against that school. Other impacts of the accreditation status on the community, witnessed by school board members include: making the community more aware of the strengths and needs of the school, helping during budget discussions, and making the problems “more real” to the public, at the time of the self-study. The process of accreditation has a rallying around the school effect by the public, and the community takes satisfaction and pride in an accredited school.

Superintendents' responses

Superintendents also recognized the benefits of full accreditation status and the negative impact of a probationary status. The common theme was one of building the community's confidence in the school and staff. As one superintendent said, “The accreditation status serves to strengthen the perception that the school is a quality institution.” One superintendent said that just the debate about the value of NEASC accreditation has been positive. “The debate about whether accreditation has any influence on quality of education and the future of graduating seniors has caused a lot of people to take a much closer look at what is offered at the high school and how we operate. That interest has translated to better understanding and somewhat more support for the school district.” When looked at in total, superintendents responded that accreditation status influenced or changed community attitudes in the following ways: budget hearings are positively influenced, an outside group validates good practices assuring the community of a quality school, expectations are

raised, things are put out in the open, and information is provided about the school's strengths and needs. One superintendent was less than enthusiastic about the value of the NEASC accreditation status. "The community has not, does not, and will not need NEASC to tell it what and how and when it should do things!"

Principals' responses

High school principals were the most positive of the three groups. They are the ones at the center of the process and understand the stakes of the accreditation status granted by NEASC. One principal commented, "As the reports are made public, the public takes close notice...they want to be assured that 'their' high school measures up to others in the state." A good report educates the community, according to several principals. One commented, "I anticipate that the community will be more educated regarding what we do. I believe this will lead to an increase in credibility and respect." Other areas of agreement among principals included the fact that a public report helps address financial issues, the community would react strongly if the school did not receive accreditation status, and positive status is a sense of pride for school and community. Poor facilities are a major reason for a warning or probation status, and a positive status increases credibility, respect and positive image. There were no negative extended replies among principals.

When the data from the open-ended responses are compared to the data from the closed responses, it would appear at first glance that there is an inconsistency. On the open-ended responses to question #3, principals scored a

81% positive rating, while superintendents scored a 79% positive rating. While the percentages are close, they reflect that principals reacted more positively to Research Question #3 than did superintendents. In the closed responses, the superintendents had the highest total of the mean for this research question.

The apparent inconsistency is actually a function of the wording in the open-ended question which asked respondents, "How does accreditation status influence community attitudes about your high school?" The wording in the open-ended question personalized the process to the high school, unlike the wording in the assertions which often asked the target groups to respond to the effect of the accreditation process on the whole school system or community. Superintendents scored higher on assertions relating to the whole school system.

Research Question Number Four - What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?

The findings of the fourth research question are based on the responses to Open-Ended Question #7, *Which has the greater impact on today's high school program and why: NEASC Accreditation or your school's District Education Improvement Plan?*

Table 4.19

Open-Ended Question #7
Percentage of responses by category for each target group.

<u>Category</u>	<u>N=27</u> <u>School Board</u>	<u>N=33</u> <u>Superintendent</u>	<u>N=36</u> <u>Principal</u>
NEASC	30%	39%	44%
DEIP	41%	39%	19%
Both Working Together	18%	22%	25%
Other	11%	0%	12%

N=Number of respondents by group who responded to the open-ended questions.

No response was recorded as other.

The open-ended question for research question #4 asked respondents to choose which school improvement process had the greatest impact on their high school. As shown in table 4.19, principals rated NEASC accreditation as having the most impact on their high school. Superintendents were evenly divided between NEASC Accreditation and DEIP. School board members strongly supported DEIP as having the most impact on the high school program. Principals and superintendents, as the day to day leaders of the school and school system respectively, can see the relationship of high school accreditation and educational change. A comprehensive evaluation of local school practices and procedures with a goal of school improvement provides the greatest impact to the school. At the same time, the superintendent and school board members are responsible for school improvement for the entire school system and they have a lot vested in the District Education Improvement Plan. The data in Table

4.19 demonstrates that of the three groups, principals see the most benefit of combining the high school NEASC accreditation process with the District Education Improvement process. Even when asked to choose one improvement plan, twenty-five percent of the principals chose both.

An examination of school board responses show that they think of the district plan first. Eleven percent of the school board members who responded to the open-ended questions stated that the superintendent and the administrators were in charge of school improvement and that these people, more so than the process, had the most impact on educational change.

From studying the extended responses, it became clear that many respondents view the NEASC as a high school improvement plan, and DEIP as the district improvement plan. Sometimes the two plans dovetail, but more often they are seen as two separate processes.

School board members' responses

The extended replies of school board members suggest that NEASC is able to “look at the big picture,” and “provide feedback as an outside agency.” DEIP has the advantage of “home rule with community influence” and that it “forces articulation throughout the system.”

Superintendents' responses

The extended replies of the superintendents indicate their strong positions on NEASC and DEIP, as well as other district initiatives. One superintendent characterized DEIP as “home grown, bottom up, not a top down outside agency;” while another wrote that DEIP is living and can be fine tuned according to what is

working and what is not. Another superintendent shared that his staff perceives DEIP as a make-work exercise required, but not utilized, by the state. Although some superintendents wrote that the NEASC holds schools to a higher standard, a few expressed concerns about the full process taking place only once every 10 years. As one superintendent expressed, "Any company that reviewed itself in depth once every ten years would be out of business."

Principals' responses

The extended replies of high school principals show that this group believes the NEASC process has a greater impact on their schools than DEIP. As building leaders and those closest to the process, principals are the most vested in the NEASC process. They are in a position to measure the impact of the NEASC on a day to day basis. The majority of principals believe that the NEASC totally involves the whole school and community in the self study. Responses from principals rate the NEASC as organized, structured, and time tested. Seven principals indicated that DEIP had the greatest impact because it is usually the superintendent's initiative and more inclusive of district-wide initiatives.

Research Question Number Five - What is the relationship between NEASC and the DEIP?

The findings of the fifth research question are based on the responses to the following Open-Ended Questions: #2 - *What is the impact and value of the accreditation process in terms of educational reform?*, #4 - *What is the main vehicle for school reform used in your high school?*, and #6 - *Does NEASC*

accreditation stand alone, support, or have no value on school improvement in your high school?

Response to Open-Ended Question #2 - What is the impact and value of the accreditation process in terms of educational reform?

Table 4.20

Open-Ended Question #2
Percentage of responses by category for each target group.

<u>Category</u>	<u>N=27</u> <u>School Board</u>	<u>N=33</u> <u>Superintendents</u>	<u>N=36</u> <u>Principals</u>
Positive	63%	76%	86%
None	11%	3%	0%
Uncertain	26%	21%	14%

N=Number of respondents by group who responded to the open-ended questions.

No response was recorded as uncertain.

The responses among all groups demonstrated that the accreditation process has a positive impact on school improvement. While each group was solidly positive, the principals clearly felt the strongest about this statement. Among this group, 86% responded that the accreditation process positively impacted educational improvement, while 14% of this group responded that the process had little impact on educational improvement.

Reasons cited to explain the value of the accreditation process on educational improvement were consistent among the three groups. The self-study phase of the process was deemed by the majority of respondents to have the most value on educational improvement.

As one school board member wrote, "The extensive self-evaluation has a large impact on the future direction of the school." This sentiment was echoed by another school board member noting that, "The self study process is key to evaluating our curriculum and education delivery system." One superintendent stated that the value of accreditation lies in its ability to "provide a process for reflection and self analysis." A principal made the following points: "The process of discussing, seeking input and feedback on programming, is very valuable. It creates the opportunity to question whether we are meeting the educational needs of our student body. All of that said, the follow-up process has the most significant impact on our school in terms of educational improvement."

Those who do not agree that the accreditation process has value and impact on educational improvement cite the nature of the process. As one superintendent wrote, "Alone - the entire process remains input driven with very little recognition of the change process and measurement outputs." A similar response, "Very little, process does not touch delivery or process or assessment of instruction," sums up the feelings of those who, while in the minority, may have voiced the strongest sentiments. One principal, while not impressed with the process as it stands now, sees hope for the future when in reply to the question he wrote, "Little, if any, based on last visit. New standards after 2000 are tied to student achievement and should have a more direct impact." The effect of the new standards on educational improvement would be an area for further study.

Response to Open-Ended Question #4

The second question inviting extended replies to expand on this research question asks, "*What is the main vehicle for school reform used in your high school?*" This question asks respondents to make a judgement as to the primary process used for school improvement in their high schools. Only those items receiving more than one response were recorded.

School board members listed, in order by the number of responses received: administration and staff, DEIP, NEASC, state assessment tests, state curriculum frameworks, strategic plan, professional development, no school reform, community feedback and school board.

Superintendents had the following responses, again recorded in order by frequency of responses: NEASC, administration and staff, DEIP, School Board, strategic plan, combination of NEASC and DEIP, continuous assessment and community support.

Among principals, the order of the processes having the most impact at their school as judged by frequency of response are: NEASC, state assessment test, school board, staff, curriculum committees, strategic plan, combination of NEASC and DEIP, DEIP, administration and professional development.

It is revealing that when the principal responses are rank ordered, the number one and two processes impacting the high school are exclusive to the high school and are high stakes processes. NEASC involves the whole high school and accreditation status is high stakes. The state assessment test is for

all tenth graders in the school. The results of the test are published in the newspaper and they are compared to scores from area high schools.

Principals cite the school board, staff and curriculum committees as having more impact on their high school than DEIP. Once again, these are all local vehicles through which principals can negotiate educational change. For the principal, DEIP is removed from where the action or ownership of the process is centered.

Response to Open-Ended Question #6

The third question was, "Does NEASC accreditation stand alone, support or have no impact on school improvement in your high school?" Responses to this question fell into three categories: stand alone, support or have no impact.

Table 4.21

Open-Ended Question #6 **Percentage of responses by category for each target group.**

<u>Category</u>	<u>N=27</u> <u>School Board</u>	<u>N=33</u> <u>Superintendents</u>	<u>N=36</u> <u>Principals</u>
Stand alone	14%	15%	6%
Support	79%	76%	91%
No impact	7%	9%	3%

N=Number of respondents by group who responded to the open-ended questions.

No response was recorded as no impact.

It is clear that all groups strongly agree that NEASC accreditation supports school improvement at their high school(s).

This study is about the value and impact of the NEASC high school accreditation procedures on school accountability and school improvement. This study is undertaken at a time in New Hampshire when at most public high schools NEASC accreditation is competing for precious staff hours with the state mandated District Educational Improvement Plan. Research Question #5 goes to the heart of this study as it seeks to determine the relationship between NEASC accreditation and DEIP. Three open-ended questions were used to elicit the respondents perceptions about this question. Open-ended question #2 asked about the impact and value of the accreditation process in terms of educational reform.

There was clear consensus among all groups that NEASC accreditation had impact and value in terms of educational reform. Of the ninety-seven total respondents to the open-ended questions, only four respondents indicated they saw no value. Three of those respondents were school board members and one was a superintendent. In each case there is a reference to the high negative impact due to the accreditation status of their high school. Approximately twenty percent of the total express uncertainty as to the impact and value of the accreditation process. Seventy-five percent of the total state that NEASC accreditation has a positive impact on educational reform. Open-Ended Question #4 again supported that NEASC accreditation was a main vehicle of educational reform at the high school level. Principals chose it overwhelmingly and superintendents scored it even with DEIP. School board members ranked it third behind administration and DEIP.

Open-Ended Question #6 asks respondents to make a judgement as to whether or not NEASC accreditation is a stand alone school improvement process or is used in conjunction with other improvement plans. The data support that NEASC is viewed by all target groups as a supporting initiative to school improvement. The principals were overwhelming in their view that NEASC accreditation should support other improvement initiatives. The question that will be explored in Chapter #5 is if all groups acknowledge the impact of NEASC accreditation in school reform, and seventy-five percent see it as a positive vehicle for educational improvement, and all groups overwhelmingly state that it supports school improvement, then why in open-ended question #7, which asked respondents to chose which had the greater impact, NEASC or DEIP, did only twenty-two percent of the respondents say both, working together? The other respondents were evenly divided, choosing either NEASC or DEIP. This data would suggest that NEASC and DEIP are for many districts competing improvement initiatives and they have not been integrated.

Summary

Chapter Four has presented, in three sections, the results of the investigation of the perceptions and attitudes of New Hampshire high school principals, superintendents of schools and school board members in relation to the impact and value of NEASC accreditation procedures on school accountability and school improvement from 1987-1997. The first section reviewed the demographic information provided by the respondents. The second section dealt with the results of the hypothesis testing, and the third

section analyzed the data drawn from the responses of school board members, superintendents and principals to the assertions in the survey.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of this research was to determine the impact and value of the NEASC high school accreditation procedures on school accountability and school improvement from 1987-1997. Further, this research investigated the relationship between NEASC Accreditation and the New Hampshire DEIP. This was examined through the use of the following five research questions:

- 1. What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?**
- 2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?**
- 3. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?**
- 4. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?**
- 5. What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and the DEIP?**

A survey was administered to school leaders (school board members, superintendents, and principals) whose local high schools had been evaluated by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges during the ten year period of 1987-1997. The survey included thirty assertions. Each respondent was asked to respond to each assertion on a four point Likert scale with a range

from strongly agree (4 points) to strongly disagree (1 point). In addition, each respondent was asked to provide written responses to seven open-ended questions. The thirty assertions and the seven open-ended questions were each related to one of the five research questions.

The data generated was reviewed in Chapter Four. The following section will discuss some conclusions that can be drawn from the data.

Conclusions and Findings

Value and Purpose of NEASC Membership

Conclusion #1 - It is clear, from the data, that membership in NEASC is viewed as beneficial to the school, school system, and community. School board members, superintendents, and principals agree that NEASC membership has value.

One finding which clearly emerges from the survey responses is that there is a shared interest in the accreditation process among all three groups of respondents. While each group has a shared interest in the process, it is clear from the responses to both the assertions and the open-ended questions that each group holds a different perspective about the purpose of membership. This difference is important to examine.

In the past, the accreditation process was seen as a high school event having little impact on school board members and superintendents. As stated in the literature review, this is no longer the case. In the aftermath of the 1983 A Nation at Risk report, the restructuring that took place within the NEASC, particularly in the areas of public disclosure and the more rigorous application of

standards, has made the accreditation process today one that clearly impacts all levels of leadership. Data from Table 4.16 demonstrate that 22% of the school board members responding to the open-ended questions said that they were uncertain as to the value and purpose of membership in NEASC. There were many strong responses among school board members that referred to how their community would react if their school was not accredited. Comments like "Heads would roll," or "It would be a terrible black mark against the school," underscore the high stakes of a negative accreditation status. This is particularly true for school board members who serve as the people's representatives.

Prior to the NEASC restructuring that took place in the mid 1980's to the mid 1990's, the NEASC was viewed as a friendly overseer of standards, and there existed a "mutual understanding that it would take something very significant to rock the boat" (Flynn 1997, p.12). School board members could wait for the certain accreditation status that came when the high school principal and staff completed the process. Today school board members, as evidenced by Table 1.1 and Table 1.2, must be concerned with the fact that the NEASC is placing an ever increasing number of high schools on warning or probation. Superintendents and principals rate the NEASC accreditation process as having much more impact on the school's education program than do school board members.

When asked to respond to Assertion #2, *Membership in the NEASC is a benefit to our high school*, superintendents had a mean score of 3.35. When this score is compared to that of Assertion #8, *Participation in the NEASC's*

accreditation process has benefits for our entire school system, the superintendents mean score dropped to 2.94, which was the lowest mean score attained on any of the five assertions by any of the groups for Research Question #1, What is the value and impact of NEASC membership?

Superintendents are in strong agreement that the accreditation process is worthwhile for the high school, but are less sure of its impact to the school system. Like school board members who must answer to the general public, superintendents cite the credentialing aspect of the process as being among the most important parts. Accreditation is seen as a measure of school quality. A fully accredited high school reflects well on the school system. Conversely, a high school on warning or probation focuses the district's attention and resources on that high school, often at the expense of other schools in the district.

It is clear from the responses that superintendents see that NEASC membership benefits their school districts, but it is also clear from the responses that many superintendents feel the pressure of the recent state legislation and the need for a single District Education Improvement Plan.

Principals are the most positive of the three groups in their responses to both the assertions and the open-ended questions. Of the three groups, principals see the most value in NEASC membership. Principals cite that the NEASC provides consistent standards by which their schools can be measured, and that the process of meeting and maintaining those standards is the central benefit to membership in NEASC. Overwhelmingly, principals speak of the self-study which brought the faculty together to reflect on practices and react to

NEASC standards, as a very important part of the process. Principals refer to the sense of accomplishment when the eighteen month self-study and the following visitation are complete. A few principals commented about their inability to stay focused on the NEASC follow-up because of more pressing district priorities in regards to the district plan.

School board members and superintendents of the past had been removed from the accreditation process. It was typical to leave the details of the accreditation process and its outcomes to the principal and faculty of the high school. The impact and the potential for community fallout over a poor accreditation report has forced school board members and superintendents to take a more active role in the accreditation process.

In recent years, the NEASC has established a Commission for Public Elementary Schools (CPES). This has led some superintendents to comment that they had elementary and/or middle schools that either have undergone the accreditation process or will undergo the process in the future. This change from the past will allow for whole district accreditation and it will bring superintendents closer to the process.

Although there were differences in each group's perspective of the accreditation process, this study shows that accreditation is no longer exclusively a high school principal's domain, but that it does impact the whole school system. While the school board member deals with the financial impact of accreditation and the community reaction to the report, the superintendent is keenly aware of community reaction, and at the same time experiences the

squeeze of state mandates for accountability and school improvement. The principal sees the NEASC accreditation process as a means of quality assurance and school improvement.

The findings show that all three groups see benefits to membership in NEASC. What is needed now is an alignment of purpose between the three groups so that a common understanding of the value of the process exists.

Accreditation Visit and Report

Conclusion #2 - School improvement is the most important result of the process and the self-study is the most important part of the process.

When all of the data for Research Question #2 are taken together, school improvement is the reason cited most often as the purpose for going through the accreditation process. While each group views the accreditation process through somewhat different lenses, all groups agree that the self-study provides the most direct benefit to the school.

Of the three groups, principals were almost unanimous in their belief that the self-study had the greatest impact on their school. A strong connection was made between the self-study and school improvement.

During the self-study, faculty and administration identify strengths and areas for improvement. Because the faculty and administration identify the areas for improvement, there is local ownership for the responsibility of improving those areas. It is especially helpful if a visiting team validates the self-study recommendations. This site-based process of identifying strengths, and

particularly weaknesses, is that which principals credit as leading to school improvement.

A finding of this study is that principals feel the most positively of the three groups about the accreditation process (self-study, visiting team, report and follow up action). The mean score of principals (3.09) for all assertions relating to the accreditation process was markedly higher than the mean score for the other target groups. Superintendents (2.97) were closer in score to principals than to school board members (2.85) who consistently had the lowest mean scores on the assertions that relate to the accreditation process.

When it came to the open ended response question, *What is the impact and value of the accreditation process in terms of educational reform?*, principals recorded a 94% positive rating concerning the accreditation process. Seventy-six percent of the superintendents rated the process as having a positive impact on the high school, and 18% as having a negative impact on the high school. Eighty-one percent of the school board members rated the accreditation process as positive, with 11% stating they were uncertain as to the impact of the accreditation process on the high school. Table 4.16 which breaks down the open-ended responses to the question, *What is the value and purpose of membership in NEASC*, clearly demonstrates that the closer a school leader is to the actual accreditation process, the more deeply and positively the feelings about the process are held. Ninety-two percent of the principals expressed that NEASC membership had positive impacts to the school system. Seventy-nine percent of the superintendents saw positive impacts to NEASC membership and

twelve percent were uncertain about the impact of NEASC membership. Sixty-seven percent of the school board members saw positive impacts to NEASC membership and twenty-two percent of the school board members stated that they were uncertain about the value and purpose of NEASC membership.

Principals tended to write longer responses that were more in depth and more passionate about their belief in the accreditation process than did school board members and superintendents.

Each group named the self-evaluation, as well as the identification of areas for improvement, as strengths of the accreditation process. What is clear, as evidenced by the high percentage of uncertain responses (22%) among school board members, is that in order for these shared sentiments to translate into real school improvement, all parties must understand the impact of the accreditation report on the school system. If a school system is going to be involved in the accreditation process, then each of the three groups which represent the individual school, the school system, and community need to plan together for the long term results of the process.

Accreditation Status

Conclusion #3 - The accreditation status serves to strengthen the perception that the school is a quality institution, but according to the stated perceptions of school leaders, any status less than full accreditation is not acceptable to the general public.

The extended replies supplied by each group to the question asking how accreditation status might influence or change community attitudes about the

high school were highlighted by a common theme which is that communities want and expect full accreditation for their high school. When full accreditation is not given, there is much community focus on the school, mainly of a negative nature. The following statement made by a school board member who has a high school on probation, "If it is good, no one pays much attention; if it is poor, they will pay a great deal of attention and there will be an uprising asking for someone's head on a platter," is fairly typical of the strong feelings of all groups regarding a negative accreditation report. The reason for this feeling was summed up well by a school board member who wrote, "The general public expects our schools to meet accreditation standards. There is no other acceptable designation.

Accreditation equals a sense of pride. Living in a small area, we form opinions about every community, and schools are usually the central focus of each town. There is a sense of pride to know that your school is accredited and that this means colleges will look favorably upon your students. When one hears of a school not receiving accreditation, the sense is that there has been a shame put on the school and community." The strong feelings about a negative accreditation report expressed in the open-ended question came primarily from school board members and superintendents. A study of the demographic data may explain the reason. Twenty-nine percent of the school board members and thirty percent of the superintendents responding to the survey were from school districts that had a high school either on warning or probation, and of all

respondents, this group would best understand the stakes of a negative accreditation status.

That the school and NEASC need to do a better job of explaining the accreditation process to the community is a clear finding of this study. The accreditation process takes the school at whatever level it is initially, and then establishes benchmarks to be used for school improvement based on standards that all NEASC member high schools agree to be measured against. The strong responses in this study to a negative status level need to be examined.

A school on warning or probation is a school that has a list of recommendations, a "blueprint" for improvement. The main reason for an adverse action by the NEASC, according to the respondents in this study, is inadequate facilities. Whatever the reason, an adverse action initiates school improvement. The NEASC, as part of the service offered to members schools, should put more of its resources behind the very part of the process that will ultimately lead to school improvement, namely garnering community support by educating the community about the mission and goals of the accreditation process and by further explaining how the process translates to school improvement.

When a member of the community reads the accreditation status granted to the local high school without an understanding of the process, the extended replies indicate that there will be one of two responses by that community member. Either an unemotional "OK" if the report is good, or it can lead to strong emotional statements like "heads will roll" if it is poor.

The many positive results expounded upon by all three groups of school leaders concerning the accreditation process need to be communicated to the community. Two years of exhaustive self-study and peer review cannot be reduced to "accredited" or "warning" without an explanation to the community of what took place, why the particular status was granted and where the process leads.

If the accreditation process is used for school accountability and is a tool for school improvement, then the community must understand and be committed to its value before the process begins.

Accreditation and Educational Change Within the Community

Conclusion #4 - The accreditation process brings about educational change.

There was clear agreement by all groups that the accreditation process brings about educational change. Respondents agreed that the standards used for the accreditation process are the criteria for school improvement, and that the accreditation process improved the education program at their local high schools.

When asked to respond to the open-ended question, "Which has the greater impact on today's high school program and why: NEASC accreditation or your school's District Education Improvement Plan?" a clear division of responses took place.

It is a finding of this study that principals view NEASC accreditation as having a greater impact on their high school than the DEIP. Forty-four percent

of the principals chose NEASC as having the most impact on their school while only nineteen percent of the principals believed that DEIP had more impact on their school. Twenty-five percent of the principals gave them equal value and twelve percent of the principal respondents cited other school improvement plans.

Superintendents, when describing the impact on the high school, were evenly divided. Thirty-nine percent of the superintendents said NEASC had the greater impact, and thirty-nine percent chose DEIP as having greater impact. The remaining twenty-two percent replied that both NEASC and DEIP worked together to impact the high school program.

Among school board members there was strong agreement that DEIP had the most impact on the high school program with forty-one percent of the school board members choosing DEIP and eleven percent writing about other improvement plans in which the district was involved, such as the Strategic Plan.

These data support the finding that those closest to the NEASC process see the most value in it. They also support the finding that there needs to be ongoing planning between the three groups of school leaders to best utilize the long term results of the process.

What this study has shown is that in many of the districts which participated in this study, accreditation is seen as a high school event and has very little carry over to the district plan. It is clear from the responses that high school principals see a connection between the two improvement plans. It is also clear that in most districts surveyed, they are not closely linked, and as one

high school principal described, they can even be at odds. After a two year self-study and peer review, that principal's high school was working diligently on the follow up phase when "a new superintendent took over and changed the priority list to his agenda."

Relationship between Accreditation and DEIP

Conclusion #5 - There is not widespread linkage between the NEASC accreditation process and the New Hampshire District Education Improvement Plan.

The data from this study have shown that there are multiple reform initiatives on-going in many of the school systems which were surveyed. The high school principal is the most loyal to the NEASC process. The superintendents surveyed in this study understand the value of NEASC accreditation as it relates to school improvement at the high school. When asked to choose which school improvement process had the greatest impact at their high school, NEASC accreditation or DEIP, only twenty percent of the superintendents replied that the two processes work together. This would indicate that eighty percent of the high schools in this study must submit to the NEASC accreditation process in addition to the DEIP.

The school board members clearly favor anything that is legislated and is called a district plan. Of the three groups surveyed, school board members have the least understanding of the NEASC process and its school improvement benefits. If the high school is in accredited status, then for many school board members the goal or end has been achieved. While school board members as a

group recognize that school improvement is a goal of NEASC, they do not seem to make the connection that NEASC accreditation is an on-going school improvement plan.

School board members and superintendents find themselves in a tough spot. On one side are the demands of the accreditation agency which is advocating that schools live by the sound educational standards that have been developed with member school input; and on the other, are the demands of legislation which is addressing student achievement and assessment. Caught in the middle are the high school principals of this study. Each principal has a school that is a member of the NEASC. Along with that membership comes the commitment to put the school through an exhaustive process of reflection and improvement. Whether the principals can use the accreditation work that the faculty has so vested its time in as their part of the DEIP, or at least to supplement the district plan or whether the accreditation process will be used at all with regards to DEIP, depends on the priority of the superintendent and school board and their understanding of, and comfort level with, the NEASC process as part of the DEIP.

A major finding of this study is that there is a need to come together around this issue to reduce the strain on the public schools who value the NEASC and accreditation.

If the accreditation process is going to be useful to the high school, then it must be valued by the district. If the accreditation process is valued, and this study has shown that it is, then the accreditation process will yield valuable

information that should be a main part of any district education improvement plan. If the district education plan is different for the high school than the accreditation report's recommendations for follow up action, then neither process is treated fairly. When time is one of the most valuable commodities that a teacher or administrator has, it does not make sense to have competing improvement initiatives. One will inevitably be put aside to focus on the demands of the other.

If local school districts cannot resolve the competing agendas for school improvement, then the high school principal would do well to take professional development in the area of juggling. The high school principal is caught in the middle of the district's needs as mandated by the State Department of Education, and the high school's need to maintain standards that assure an "accredited status."

RSA 193-C was established to improve student achievement and the quality of curriculum and instruction. From this legislation came the New Hampshire Educational Assessment Program which is based on standards defined in the state curriculum frameworks. This legislation does not provide qualitative standards or expectations by which schools can judge themselves. Success is defined rather narrowly by competition and quantitative achievement, neither of which lend themselves to the humanistic qualities of the school. The accountability processes developed by the state have a strong reliance on outcomes based test scores and do not incorporate other factors important to a whole school evaluation. The state government has not provided its education

department with adequate personnel to monitor success and failure or to provide the resources needed to help a struggling school.

In contrast, NEASC has a long history of providing its member schools with a process that promotes that the school discover their own strengths and weaknesses and it provides a structure for schools to improve. It has done this with generations of volunteers who have come from the ranks of the member schools. These volunteers contribute considerable time and effort to provide peer review of a school's self-evaluation. This format relies more on local control. Though the standards are regional, the success lies in the work of the self-evaluation which looks at all of the parts that make the whole. It does not rely on a single measurement output, such as student test scores.

There is a place for both accountability and improvement plans to work together. They can compliment each other well. The DEIP addresses the state's need for outcome data regarding student achievement, and the NEASC accreditation process looks at the school in total, but as some of the superintendents in this study stated, currently lacks outcome data. Because curriculum instruction and assessment are addressed in the NEASC standards, it would not be difficult to combine the state's need for quantitative data with the NEASC process for school improvement.

Extending Flynn's Study

This study sought to extend Flynn's (1997) research which asked Massachusetts school leaders about the impact and value of NEASC high school accreditation procedures from 1986-1991. The current study posed the same

question in New Hampshire with an emphasis on school accountability and school improvement as they relate to NEASC accreditation and the DEIP for the years 1987-1997. Four of the research questions used in this study were common to both studies and the conclusions reached can be compared.

There is clear agreement on the conclusions to three research questions. (1) The accreditation process is valued by school board members, superintendents and principals, (2) Having an accredited status is viewed important, but any status less than full accreditation is by far more crucial to the school, (3) The accreditation process has a direct effect on educational change.

There was a level of disagreement to the conclusion of one research question. Flynn's study found that NEASC membership was perceived as having little value beyond the accreditation process. The current study found that membership in the NEASC is viewed as beneficial to the school, school system, and community. This difference may be a reflection of factors particular to the years studied in each of the research projects. Flynn studied the years 1986-1991, a time when NEASC was going through its own reform movement. The years of the current study, 1987-1997, included most of the 1990's, a time when the NEASC achieved consistency of purpose and reached out to its member schools in an effort to better support and communicate with the schools as they went through the revised process with new standards.

Beyond the conclusions reached for the research questions, both studies have the following findings in common: (1) There is a shared interest in the accreditation process among the three groups of school leaders, (2)

Accreditation is no longer a high school only event, (3) The school and the NEASC need to do a better job of explaining the accreditation process to the public, and (4) There needs to be an agreement of purpose between the three groups of school leaders.

Recommendations

As a result of these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The NEASC, working with its member schools, should develop a community education component that will better help the community understand the accreditation process, and this component should be utilized as a required first step of the accreditation process.
2. The NEASC and the State Department of Education should continue the dialogue which ensures a commonality of purpose and assists the local school districts in utilizing the NEASC accreditation report in the District Education Improvement Plan.
3. Local school systems should include the NEASC accreditation report as an integral part of all district improvement plans.
4. School board members, superintendents, and principals should develop a common understanding of the purpose of accreditation and agree on its role as a tool for school improvement at the district level.
5. The NEASC should send a copy of the accreditation response letter to the appropriate officials at the NH State Department of Education. This letter, which reports status and follow up requirements, would help state officials to monitor the compliance with minimum state

education standards as well as the DEIP of each NEASC member school.

Recommendations for Further Study

As a result of these conclusions, findings, and recommendations, further study would compliment or advance this work. Therefore, consideration of the following studies is suggested for future researchers.

1. A study of the relationship of the recommendations included in the visiting team report to the school system's DEIP.
2. A study to determine the levels of understanding about the accreditation process that would include school leaders and the State Department of Education personnel who are charged with overseeing DEIP.
3. A study to determine the value and impact of whole district K-12 accreditation at the school and school system level.
4. A study to determine the level of understanding of the community at large about the accreditation process.
5. A future study that would compare the perceptions of school leaders regarding the value and impact of the new and soon to be released year 2000 NEASC standards and procedures to the findings of this study.

Final Comments

This research was undertaken in an effort to examine the value and impact of the NEASC accreditation process in a time of competing accountability

and school improvement initiatives. The following question was posed in Chapter One - *If the NEASC process is valued by public high school educational leaders, why shouldn't districts use the process to fulfill their mandated DEIP requirements?*

This study has found that the NEASC accreditation process is valued by educational leaders, and it has also found that just valuing a process is not enough to fully utilize the process. What became clear in this study is that there is a lack of understanding as to the purpose of the NEASC accreditation process.

It was not surprising to find that the accreditation process is not fully understood by the school board and the public they represent as that is often the case with educational initiatives. Educators at all levels generally do not take the time to explain to the school board or the general public the purpose behind the various educational initiatives that are underway in their arenas, even though it is the public who in one form or another funds those initiatives. In the absence of full information, the public reacts to sensational bits of the whole.

Each fall, the NH State Department of Education releases the results of the state assessment tests to the newspapers. This is the only part of the New Hampshire Education Improvement and Assessment Program (NHEIAP RSA 193-C) that is consistently made public. Based on this limited information about the state's improvement and assessment program, the general public reacts to the published test scores by comparing schools and school districts solely on the basis of this incomplete information that is provided to them. Educators know

that test scores are only a part of an involved process, the goal of which is to improve teaching and learning. The general public needs to have the educators' knowledge about the purpose and process of this state initiative.

A similar situation exists with NEASC accreditation. In the absence of complete information about the purpose and process of accreditation, the public reacts to the only part of the process reported in the newspapers, which is the school's accreditation status. The status alone is only a small part of the accreditation story, and the public needs to know the whole story. With accreditation status comes an accreditation report complete with recommendations for improvement. The public needs to have a level of understanding of the process leading to the recommendations, and of the process that will be used to develop and utilize an on-going school improvement plan. That NEASC needs to do a better job of explaining its purpose and process to the general public was a finding of this study. What the NEASC cannot do is explain to the general public how the follow-up or school improvement phase of the process will be utilized at the local level. At the follow-up stage, whether the report simply rests on the shelf in the principal's office or is used as a blueprint for improvement, depends upon the ability of local school leaders to appreciate its purpose and to coordinate the use of the two improvement plans common to each school district in this study, the NEASC Accreditation Process and the NH District Education Improvement Plan.

There is a need for the NEASC and the State Department of Education to work together to ensure the success of educational reform and to encourage the

maintenance of sound educational standards. Dussault (1985) stated that the New England Association of Schools and Colleges was officially recognized by the federal government as an accrediting agency for "secondary and post secondary schools in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont with the approval of the Educational Amendments of 1976 which tied federal funds to accreditation." There is precedence for a partnership between government and the NEASC. It would seem that now would be a good time for an understaffed New Hampshire State Department of Education and the NEASC, who are both responsible for schools caught in the middle of multiple improvement initiatives, to form a partnership that would reduce the conflict which currently exists in many New Hampshire school districts.

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APPENDIX A

STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

The school shall have a statement of purpose which reflects the beliefs and values of educators, parents, students, and community members. It shall include clearly articulated and high expectations for student performance in both academic and social areas as well as for school performance. Expectations for students shall serve to guide the entire school program and shall be the basis for curriculum and instructional decision-making within the whole school and for short and long range planning. The school's statement of purpose and student expectations shall be compatible with the district's statement of purpose and shall be approved by both the faculty of the school and the district's governing body.

There shall be ongoing and regular review of the school's statement of purpose so that it remains a dynamic document to address student needs, community expectations, and the operation of all school programs. The statement of purpose shall be communicated to the students, parents, school and community. It shall be supported and implemented by the faculty, support staff and administration.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION:

The curriculum, which includes both the program of studies and student activities, shall be the formalized plan to fulfill the school's statement of purpose. It shall be diversified and balanced and designed to assist students to reach articulated levels of performance in all learning areas.

Adequate time, financial resources, and personnel shall be committed to curriculum development, improvement of instruction, and assessment of student performance. There shall be effective curricular coordination and articulation between and among all academic areas within the school as well as with sending schools in the district.

Student assessment data shall be utilized in the curriculum development and evaluation process, in the review of instructional strategies and practices, and in the planning of staff development programs designed to improve instruction.

Instructional strategies and practices shall be consistent with the school's statement of purpose and shall reflect current research in teaching and learning. These strategies and practices shall be varied and appropriate and shall engage students in progressively higher order thinking activities. The use of appropriate technology shall be incorporated into all areas of instruction. Teacher supervision and evaluation processes shall be used to improve instruction.

There shall be adequate financial support to provide instructional materials, equipment, and supplies consistent with the written curriculum.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES:

Student support services shall be designed to enable each student to participate in and benefit from the educational programs within the school. Student support services personnel shall work cooperatively with other professional and support staff to address the academic, social, emotional and physical needs of students.

There shall be adequate resources to provide appropriate programs and services to address the developmental needs of all students. These resources shall include, but not be limited to, certified and/or licensed professional personnel, adequate materials, and community agencies and resources, as appropriate.

The school's student support services and programs shall include a range of guidance and health services, personal counseling, and access to referral options both inside and outside the school system. The roles and responsibilities of all personnel shall be clearly defined in writing. Student services personnel shall be provided opportunities to participate in staff development activities appropriate to their role. All programs for student support services shall be systematically evaluated and revised, as appropriate, on a regular basis.

There shall be a system for effective and ongoing communications with students, parents, and school personnel designed to keep them informed about and involved in the delivery of student support services.

The assigned facilities shall be appropriate and accessible to students and shall ensure privacy and confidentiality. The school shall apply appropriate technology to enhance the delivery of student support services. Student records shall be maintained in a confidential and secure manner, consistent with federal and state law.

LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY AND MEDIA SERVICES:

The school shall have a library technology and media services program that is fully integrated into the school's curriculum and instructional program and consistent with the school's statement of purpose. This program shall foster independent inquiry by enabling students and faculty to utilize various information resources and technologies.

There shall be certified media personnel and support staff, as appropriate, who are assigned to work collaboratively with other school personnel to ensure that the use of technology and media information resources is part of the instructional program and strategies used within and among learning areas.

A wide range of materials and information resources in a variety of formats from both within and outside the school shall be available for use by students, faculty and support staff. The library technology and media services program shall reflect current developments in the use and application of learning technology. Materials and equipment shall be adequate, properly maintained, catalogued, and replaced when appropriate. Professional development opportunities for media personnel and the school's support staff and faculty shall be in place to support the media program. Students, faculty and support staff shall have regular and frequent access to the facilities and media programs as an integral part of their educational experience.

ADMINISTRATION, FACULTY, AND SUPPORT STAFF:

The administration, faculty, and support staff shall be sufficient in number and appropriately certified both to help ensure the attainment of the school's statement of purpose and to meet effectively the needs of all students. There shall be sufficient staff and financial support to ensure safe student transportation, maintenance of the facility and grounds, appropriate food services, adequate health/nursing support, and necessary clerical services.

Although accountable to higher authority, the school's administration shall have the responsibility, autonomy and authority necessary to provide effective leadership within the school. The organizational structure of the school shall include appropriate personnel to support ongoing curriculum and instructional improvement and to ensure the formal supervision and evaluation of all personnel.

There shall be an adequately funded and effective program to provide professional in-service and staff development programs to address identified curricular and instructional needs.

The administration, faculty and support staff shall be involved actively in decision-making related to curriculum, instruction, planning, and school operations. They shall have appropriate input into the development of the master schedule and school procedures. Members of the administration, faculty, and support staff shall be appropriately accessible to students and parents.

The work of the administration and faculty shall reflect collegiality, effective communications, and an empathetic understanding of student needs. Administration, faculty, and support staff shall have high educational expectations for themselves and their students. There shall be cooperative relationships among the school board, central office, the school administration, faculty, and support staff.

Written school board policies shall be available to all personnel to guide the operation of the school. Written policies and procedures shall clarify the roles and responsibilities of the administration, faculty, and support staff.

Appropriate administrative and personnel records, as well as appropriate student records, shall be maintained by the school administration, consistent with federal and state law and local policy.

SCHOOL FACILITIES:

The school site, plant, and equipment shall support and enhance all aspects of the educational program of the school and shall be maintained to ensure an environment that is healthy and safe for all occupants.

There shall be a planned and adequately funded program of building and site management that ensures the maintenance and repair of facilities and equipment as well as thorough and routine cleaning of the facility. There shall be ongoing planning to address future facility and space needs as well as needed capital improvements.

The physical plant and facilities shall meet all applicable federal and state law and be in compliance with local fire, health and safety regulations. Proper documentation shall be on file indicating the school's compliance in these areas.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT:

There shall be effective, ongoing and comprehensive interaction and communications with the community for the purpose of enlisting support for school programs and activities.

The school and its governing body shall have a planned program to encourage the involvement of community members in the school and its programs. This involvement shall include, but not be limited to, active community participation in school activities and in the development of school-community partnerships which enhance and promote the school's educational programs and services. The school's administration, faculty, and support staff shall demonstrate an on-going commitment to parent involvement and partnership in school activities.

The district's governing body shall formulate educational policy and support the roles and responsibilities of the administration in implementing that policy. This governing body shall also seek to solicit and promote appropriate community involvement in strategic planning and in the development of educational policy.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT:

The community and the district's governing body shall ensure an adequate and dependable source of revenue to provide and maintain appropriate school programs, personnel, services, facilities, equipment, technological support, materials, and supplies for all students served by the school.

Faculty and building administrators shall have active involvement in the budgetary process, including its development and implementation.

SCHOOL CLIMATE:

The administration, faculty, and support staff shall provide a safe and orderly environment within the school. School rules and standards for behavior shall be reasonable, clearly articulated, and enforced fairly.

The climate of the school shall be positive, respectful, and supportive, resulting in a sense of pride and ownership. All students shall be valued as unique individuals who are encouraged to learn and to achieve to their highest potential. The education, personal growth, and well-being of all students shall be the primary concern of the school.

There shall be open and active communication among members of the school community who shall support, acknowledge, and recognize one another's accomplishments. Students, parents, and members of the community shall feel comfortable and accepted at the school.

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE:

The school shall identify specific criteria for assessing student and school performance and shall utilize appropriate and varied methods to assess this performance.

There shall be a system in place whereby assessment results are interpreted and reported to the community in an understandable manner. These results shall be used regularly to assess the effectiveness of the school's curriculum and instructional practices, and to develop strategies for improving student learning.

There shall be identified school personnel with adequate time and resources who are responsible for ensuring that the assessment process is implemented and that assessment results are reported and used in the evaluation of curriculum and instruction.

APPENDIX B

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To: Respondents
From: George A. Cushing, Principal
Rye Middle School

Date: October, 1998
Subject: NEASC Survey

Thank you for taking part in this survey. All data gathered will be treated with complete confidentiality and in anonymity.

There are three parts:

Demographic Information - Attitudinal Survey - Open Ended Questions

Please take the time to complete the whole survey. Results of the survey will be made available to all participating districts. Thank you again for your assistance.

Definitions: For the purposes of this survey, the following definitions are being used:

- NEASC:** *New England Association of Schools and Colleges*, the agency who oversees the accreditation of public high schools in NH.
- Accreditation process:** A continuous process beginning with the self study completed by the faculty, followed by the accreditation visit performed by the NEASC visiting committee, and continued through the follow up reports and activities required of the school itself.
- Accreditation status:** A school's standing with the NEASC (Accreditation; Accreditation with warning; Accreditation with probation; Termination)
- Accreditation visit:** The four days spent by the NEASC visiting committee at the school.
- Accreditation report:** The final report submitted by the visiting committee to the NEASC to assist in determining a school's accreditation status.
- D.E.I.P.:** *District Education Improvement Plan*, a comprehensive statement of a district's strategies to implement its goals required by the NH Department of Education.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

My current role in our school system: (Check one ☐) School Board member _____
Superintendent of Schools _____
High School Principal _____

I filled this same position during the period of the most recent high school accreditation visit. (Check one ☐) Yes _____
No _____

What is your high school's current accreditation status? Accreditation _____
Accreditation with warning _____
Accreditation with probation _____
No Affiliation _____

ATTITUDINAL SURVEY

In the column to the right of the statements, circle the response that most accurately describes your current perception or attitude about each statement.

Strongly Agree	SA
Agree	A
Disagree	D
Strongly Disagree	SD

Example:

1. NEASC membership is voluntary.

SA A D SD

Current Perception

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. The accreditation process has raised community awareness of the strengths and needs of our school. | SA A D SD |
| 2. Membership in the NEASC is a benefit for our high school. | SA A D SD |
| 3. A purpose of the NEASC is to establish high standards for its member secondary schools. | SA A D SD |
| 4. The accreditation process is an integral part of the school's improvement plans for growth and development across the curriculum. | SA A D SD |
| 5. The NEASC's Standards of Accreditation are the criteria for school improvement. | SA A D SD |
| 6. Participation in the NEASC's accreditation process has had an impact on our school's educational program. | SA A D SD |
| 7. NEASC accreditation is consistent with the District Education Improvement Plan. | SA A D SD |
| 8. Participation in the NEASC's accreditation process has benefit for our entire school system. | SA A D SD |
| 9. System-wide educational improvement plans include the NEASC recommendations. | SA A D SD |
| 10. The accreditation process demonstrated that the entire accreditation method was worthwhile. | SA A D SD |
| 11. The accreditation process provided information on which to make sound educational changes in our school. | SA A D SD |
| 12. The accreditation process provided a blueprint for educational reform in our high school. | SA A D SD |

13.	The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is a source of pride to me.	SA	A	D	SD
14.	The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is derived from our school's ability to meet NEASC standards.	SA	A	D	SD
15.	The accreditation status granted by NEASC is derived from our high school's ability to maintain consistent education standards.	SA	A	D	SD
16.	The accreditation process effected positive change in our high school's educational program.	SA	A	D	SD
17.	The accreditation process served to make the community aware of the needs of the school.	SA	A	D	SD
18.	The DEIP is used for school improvement.	SA	A	D	SD
19.	A goal of the NEASC is to foster school improvement in its member schools.	SA	A	D	SD
20.	The accreditation visit and report accentuated the strengths of our high school.	SA	A	D	SD
21.	The accreditation process has helped our school win public approval.	SA	A	D	SD
22.	The NEASC accreditation self-improvement component will be used as the D.E.I.P. response.	SA	A	D	SD
23.	The accreditation status granted by the NEASC upgraded the expectations of the community for our school.	SA	A	D	SD
24.	The NEASC accreditation process is used for school improvement.	SA	A	D	SD
25.	The community had strong interest in the results of the accreditation process.	SA	A	D	SD
26.	Our accreditation status has enabled our students to be accepted at top rated colleges.	SA	A	D	SD
27.	The accreditation status granted by the NEASC is valued by our school system.	SA	A	D	SD
28.	The accreditation process has improved education in the community.	SA	A	D	SD
29.	The accreditation process itself enables our high school to be accountable to the public.	SA	A	D	SD
30.	The accreditation process has had more impact on our high school program than the NH DEIP.	SA	A	D	SD

OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

Please answer each of the following questions in a few short sentences or phrases. If you wish to explain in detail, please feel free to add paper. Thank you again.

1. What impact has the NEASC process had on your high school?

2. What is the impact and value of the accreditation process in terms of education reform?

3. How does the accreditation status influence or change community attitudes and perceptions about your high school?

4. What is the main vehicle for school reform used in your high school?

5. What is the value and purpose of membership in the NEASC?

6. Does NEASC accreditation stand alone, support, or have no value on school improvement in your high school? Please explain..

7. Which has the greater impact on today's high school program and why: NEASC Accreditation or your school's District Education Improvement Plan? Please explain.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!!

APPENDIX C

Relationship Between Research Questions and Assertions

Research Question	Number of Assertions	Assertions Identified by Number
What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?	5	2,3,6,8,19
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?	6	1,10,11,12,16,20
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?	6	13,14,15,23,26,27
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?	6	5,17,21,25,28,29
What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and the DEIP?	7	4,7,9,18,22,24,30

APPENDIX D

Relationship Between Research Questions and Open Ended Questions

Research Question	Number of Assertions	Open ended Questions Identified by Number
What is the perceived value and purpose of NEASC membership?	1	5
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation visit and report?	1	1
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the accreditation status granted by the NEASC?	1	3
What are the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about the role of the accreditation process in bringing about educational change within the community?	1	7
What is the relationship between NEASC accreditation and the DEIP?	3	2, 4, 6

APPENDIX E

S.A.U. # 50

School Administrative Unit Number Fifty

■ 48 Post Road, Greenland, NH 03840 ■ (603) 422-9572 FAX 422-9575 ■

October 15, 1998

Dear Superintendent:

George Cushing, principal of Rye Junior High School, and candidate for Ph.D. at the University of New Hampshire, has developed a research study, the result of which may greatly assist our efforts to shape, determine, and report on the quality of education beyond merely reporting test scores.

George is a very strong, professional educator who sees the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' accreditation program as a vehicle for meaningful reform. Since most of our high schools and many middle schools and elementary schools are members of NEASC, there is no need to add any additional systems to produce the goal of determining quality education and reporting to the public in a meaningful way. Educating virtually all the children of all the people is complex. We may be just at the right moment in time to reconsider the role of NEASC in the design, improvement and explanation of education to the general public.

I am convinced that George is on to something important and I ask you to please help him with this study by completing the questionnaire and asking your high school principal and school board members to participate. I make this request fully sensitive to this busy time of year and thank you, sincerely, for your assistance advance.

Sincerely,

Stephen F. Maio
Superintendent of Schools

APPENDIX F

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October 1998

Dear Superintendent,

As a middle school principal, and candidate for the Ph.D. in Educational Administration at the University of New Hampshire, I am writing a doctoral dissertation for which I respectfully request assistance. My dissertation centers on attitudes and perceptions of school leaders about the value and impact of the NEASC accreditation process in times of multiple educational reform initiatives. My study will explore the relationship between the accreditation process and the New Hampshire mandated District Educational Improvement Plan. The data you will provide is vital to support my research.

I have enclosed three surveys. As superintendent, I need you to complete one survey (orange). Please ask your high school principal(s) to complete the second (green), and a school board member to complete the third survey (blue). Please select a school board member who served in that capacity (school board) at the time your high school last went through the accreditation process. Please select the school board member whose last name is closest alphabetically to your own (superintendent's) last name. In the event that there is no school board member who has been through the accreditation process, simply select the one whose last name is closest alphabetically to your own. The survey takes 15-20 minutes to complete. Please ask the principal(s) and school board member to mail their surveys back to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope within two weeks.

Although the survey envelope has a code number on the first page identifying your school system for my record keeping purposes, be assured that all responses will be held confidential. Responses will be averaged by group, and only the average ratings will be reported.

I truly appreciate your efforts on my behalf. Thank you for distributing the information and the other two surveys appropriately. Please try to encourage the return of the responses to me within two weeks so that I can complete my study on time.

Should you have any questions regarding the survey, please feel free to contact me at 603-964-5591. A copy of the survey results will be made available to all participating districts.

Please accept my sincere thanks and express my gratitude to those you ask to complete the survey. Best wishes for a wonderful school year.

Yours truly,

George A. Cushing
Rye Middle School Principal
NEASC Commission Member

APPENDIX G

October 1998

Dear Fellow Educator,

As a middle school principal, and candidate for Ph.D. in Educational Administration at the University of New Hampshire, I am writing a doctoral dissertation for which I respectfully request assistance. My dissertation centers on attitudes and perceptions of school leaders about the value and impact of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) accreditation process in times of multiple educational reform initiatives. My study will explore the relationship between the accreditation process and the New Hampshire mandated District Educational Improvement Plan (D.E.I.P.). The data you will provide is vital to support my research.

Please complete this survey and mail it back to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please try to return the completed survey to me within two weeks so that I can complete my study on time. The survey should take 15-20 minutes to complete. Although the survey has a code number on the first page identifying your school system for my recordkeeping purposes, be assured that all responses will be held confidential. Responses will be averaged for each of the following groups: Superintendents, High School Principals, and School Board Members. Only the average rating of each group will be reported and compared.

I truly appreciate your effort on my behalf. Should you have any questions regarding the survey, please feel free to contact me at 603-964-5591. A copy of the survey results will be made available to all participating districts.

Please accept my sincere thanks and those of my family, for completing the survey. Best wishes for a wonderful school year.

Yours truly,

George A. Cushing
Rye Middle School Principal
NEASC Commission Member

APPENDIX H

November 1998

Dear Superintendent

Approximately three weeks ago, you should have received a letter from me requesting that you, your high school principal and a school board member participate in a study I am conducting about the attitudes and perceptions of New Hampshire school leaders about the value of the NEASC accreditation process. As of today, I am still eagerly awaiting your response. Your opinions are important to the success of my study.

If you have already mailed the survey response, please accept my thanks. Please encourage your high school principal and a school board member to complete the survey and mail it to me as soon as possible.

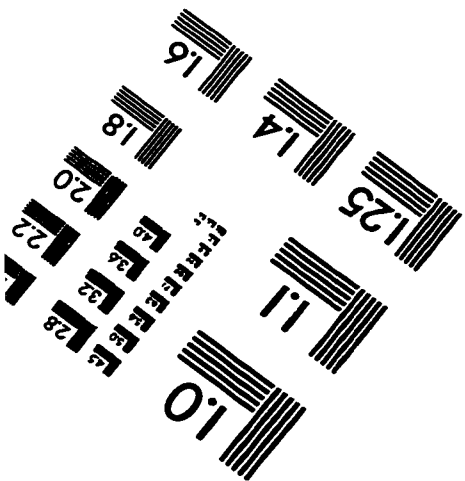
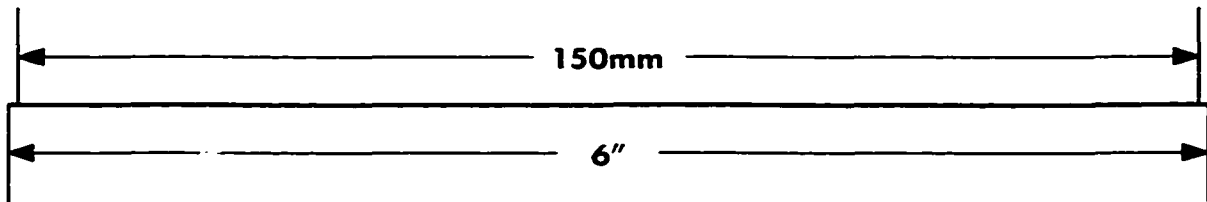
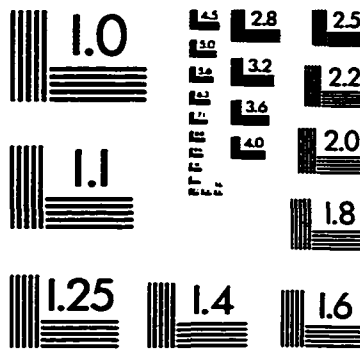
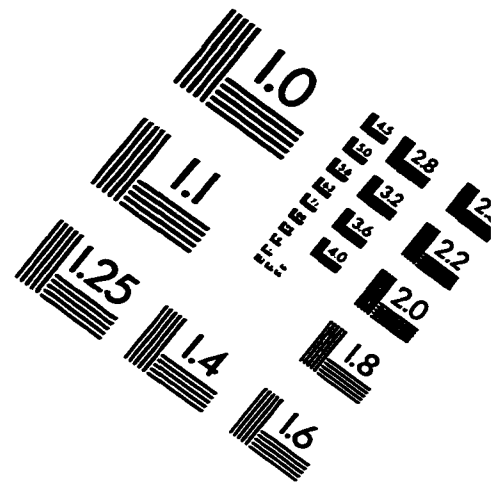
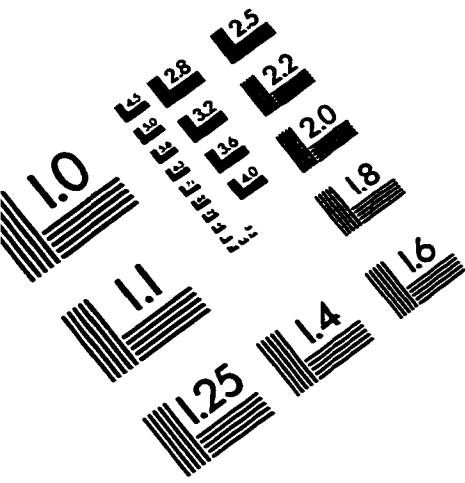
If you did not receive the information and surveys, please contact me at 603-964-5591, and I will gladly mail you another packet.

Thank you for your time and your help with this survey.

Sincerely,

George A. Cushing

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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